

EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

EXOBORNE

THE DIRECTOR OF THE DIVISION RETURNS FOR A
MULTIPLAYER SHOOTER WITH AN EXTREME TWIST

PLUS

THE MAKING
OF HALO WARS
ARE GAME BUDGETS
OUT OF CONTROL?
HOW SOLO DEVS
FIND SUCCESS

#394

MARCH 2024



The forecast: heavy rain, with risk of exo-rig conflict

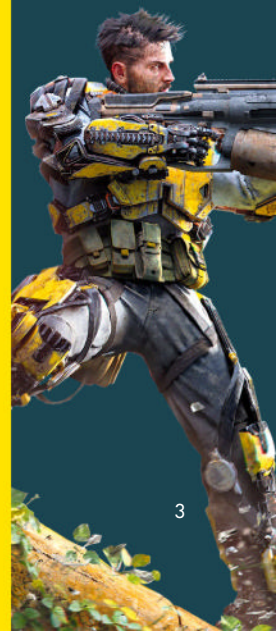
Why don't we see more weather in games? The power of some teeming rain was obvious as far back as 1991, during the opening section of *A Link To The Past*, whose atmosphere still has lessons to teach developers working today. Perhaps weather just isn't tangible enough for most game developers, who figure that it's simply a lot easier to get players to care about an Apache attack helicopter or gurning zombie showing up.

Or maybe it's that it doesn't guarantee a satisfactory outcome when it's at its most noticeable. The snow that arrives in *GTA Online*'s Los Santos every Christmas stirs the same sort of reactions we see in real-life places that don't get much of the white stuff for most of the year. (Everyone loves a snowman, and it's always a guilty treat to have those crappy winter gardening jobs hidden away from sight.) After a couple of days of fishtailing your ride off icy roads when you're trying to get somewhere in a hurry, though, frankly the thaw cannot arrive quickly enough. Equally, we don't recall anyone finishing last year's magnificent *Super Mario Bros Wonder* and saying, "You know what? *Great* game. A modern classic, even. Could've done with a few more slippery slidey ice levels, mind."

Perhaps, more than anything, weather in games just needs a really good reason to be there. If so, this month's cover star holds up to scrutiny. *Exoborne* has extreme climate change at the centre of its entire conceit, cooking up a scenario in which a cataclysmic event has wrecked the Earth – and continues to unleash havoc as you play. It's a fresh take on the extraction shooter, a genre that, despite its youth, feels like it's ready to be given a lift. Leading the development team at Sharkmob in Malmö are Petter Mannerfelt and Martin Hultberg, whose CVs include a succession of games renowned for their multiplayer, including *World In Conflict*, *The Division* and *Vampire The Masquerade: Bloodhunt*. The duo explain the nuances of their new adventure, encapsulating exo-rigs, grappling hooks, parachutes and the negotiation of a hurricane or two, on p54.



Exclusive subscriber edition



games

Hype

- 32 **Once Human**
Android, iOS, PC
- 36 **Lost Records: Bloom & Rage**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 40 **Nirvana Noir**
PC, Xbox Series
- 44 **Thrasher**
PCVR, Quest, consoles TBA
- 46 **Chasing The Unseen**
PC
- 48 **Darkweb Streamer**
PC
- 50 **Hype roundup**

Play

- 94 **The Finals**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series
- 98 **Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown**
PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 100 **Asgard's Wrath 2**
Quest 2, 3, Pro
- 102 **Another Code: Recollection**
Switch
- 104 **Go Mecha Ball**
PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series
- 106 **Home Safety Hotline**
PC
- 107 **Raindrop Sprinters**
PC, Switch



32



Follow these links
throughout the magazine
for more content online



Explore the iPad
edition of Edge for
additional content

94





76



#394

sections

MARCH 2024



88

Knowledge

8 Power and responsibility

Why has the game industry run into trouble, and what happens next?

12 Taken to Task

Sallywag Arcade on the pitfalls of adapting TV's Taskmaster for VR

14 Recalibrating PS5

Why Sony's PlayStation Access controller is a big win for inclusivity

16 Feat of clay

Descending into a Plasticine stop-motion nightmare in *Visceratum*

18 Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls, featuring Takashi Kiryu

20 This Month On Edge

The things that caught our eye during the production of E394

Dispatches

22 Dialogue

Edge readers share their opinions; one wins an exclusive T-shirt

24 Trigger Happy

Steven Poole has had more than his fill of lore for the time being

26 The Outer Limits

Alex Spencer belatedly has his first D&D experience, after a fashion

28 Narrative Engine

Jon Ingold begins his new column with a real conversation starter

82 The Making Of...

An iconic FPS transformed into a console RTS: why *Halo Wars* was a jubilant swan song for Ensemble

88 Studio Profile

How audacity and ambition has allowed Polish dev Fool's Theory to punch well above its weight

108 Time Extend

The era of the plastic instrument may be over, yet *Rock Band 4* continues its extended encore

113 The Long Game

A rousing new perspective on a classic: why Capcom's *Resident Evil 4* remake is even better in VR

Features

54 Apocalypse Now

Climate catastrophe meets the extraction shooter in Sharkmob's thrillingly unpredictable *Exoborne*

66 Flying Solo

Four indie developers outline the advantages and challenges of creating games on your own

76 An Audience With...

Ikumi Nakamura on past success and hopes for the future with *Kemuri* at new studio Unseen



66



54



EDGE

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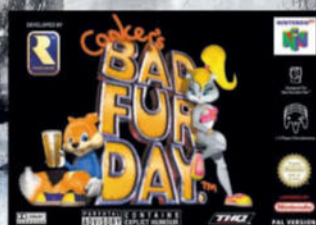
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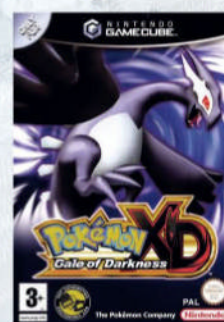
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Power and responsibility

Is the industry **heading for a crash?** And, if so, who's going to do something about it?

The start of a new year is generally a time for optimism. But after 2023 brought unprecedented layoffs to the videogame industry, in spite of some huge commercial and critical successes, and with the release calendar looking a little bare, 2024 begins in more existential fashion. Clearly, something has gone wrong. Is it sustainable to keep making games the way they are today, or is a reckoning on the cards?

It's a question that feels pressing in light of triple-A development budgets. Last June, poorly redacted court documents revealed that Sony's budgets for *Horizon Forbidden West* and *The Last Of Us Part II* were in the region of \$212 million and \$220 million respectively. Following a ransomware attack against Insomniac Games in December, meanwhile, an image of an internal document suggested a budget of \$315 million for *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, with similar amounts earmarked for the studio's future titles.

One person who knows all about these spiralling budgets is **Shawn Layden**, who was chairman of Sony Interactive Entertainment Worldwide Studios until 2019, and now works as an advisor to Tencent and Streamline Media Group. Layden says he remembers getting "night sweats" ahead of a budget meeting where he planned to ask for \$3 million – a paltry amount by today's standards. "That has now accelerated to triple-digit millions," he says, estimating that budgets have doubled since the PS4 era. "At what point do chief financial officers just slam their calculator on the tabletop and say, 'I can't greenlight \$300 million – there's no way I can pencil out the math'?"

WALLED GARDEN
In December, China announced a ban on some monetisation and engagement tactics for free-to-play games, such as daily login rewards, and imposed spending limits, sending shares in NetEase and Tencent tumbling. Mike Rose says most western companies barely have a presence in the Chinese market, so the majority of publishers will be relatively unaffected, but it's bad news for those that rely on China. Shawn Layden thinks the move will mean Chinese firms, plus some Korean ones, will focus more on western markets: "I see all those players doubling out extra hard."



Former SIE studios boss Shawn Layden and Stuart Dinsey, chairman of Curve

Not just yet, reckons Curve Games chairman **Stuart Dinsey**, who expects game budgets at the top end of the market to continue increasing – though with the caveat that we'll see "more scrutiny than ever, and more outsourcing". However, outside of the blockbuster sphere, he says, it's likely to be a different story. "Elsewhere, I can see attempts to reduce budgets, especially in the mid-space and indie [space], unless there is a clear reason for confidence. This will probably manifest itself as fewer games getting to market, especially on console."

At indie publisher No More Robots, this process has already begun. "For clarity, our budgets at No More Robots are going down, and have been for the last 18 months," says founder **Mike Rose**. "Which is likely why we're somehow doing well during all of this."

Rose points to one particular factor pushing budgets up for large and small publishers alike. "At this point, we've unfortunately taught players that all games should be service games, and they'll complain if any game doesn't receive constant updates after launch," he says. "So when we put out a game, we now have to think about what the next couple of years of the game look like." Which is, he concludes, "pretty stressful".

When it comes to the continued trajectory of development spending, Layden is firm: "These budgets are not sustainable. The turnaround on a game,

we're talking about four to six years. And money gets scary over those kinds of timelines." One solution, he suggests, is to make games shorter, excising the filler. "There's a lot of, 'I rode that boat to get that diamond that unlocked that gate'," Layden says. "But was that really satisfying gameplay? Ask yourself that question. It's called grinding for a reason."


There is of course another potential answer that many executives have their eyes on, and one that threatens to push things in the opposite direction. "I think it is very possible that savings from using

AI in various parts of the development process will mean that budgets don't continue to increase so much," says **Patrick O'Lunaigh**, CEO of VR specialist NDreams. "Instead, developers are empowered to deliver more for the same money with the help of smarter, AI-assisted pipelines."

There are still questions around using these tools in a commercial context – The New York Times announced in December that it was suing OpenAI and Microsoft over the use of copyrighted work to train their AI systems. And this isn't the only reason to avoid the technology, from the inevitable backlash (as Rose puts it, "if you even hint at using AI in videogames, the industry will be immensely angry at you") to ethical concerns.

"The ethics of it all will continue to be rightly called into question," says **Jez Harris**, chief content officer at Chorus Worldwide Games. "Just not ▶

"These budgets are not sustainable. The turnaround on a game, we're talking about four to six years"

A full-page photograph of the Venom character from Spider-Man 2. He is shown from the waist up, crouching in a dark, rainy environment. His black, glossy suit is highly detailed, showing the texture of the symbiote. The white spider emblem on his chest is prominent. His eyes are large and white, contrasting with the dark mask. Rain streaks are visible all around him, and blurred city lights are in the background. The overall mood is dark and intense.

The reported budget for *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* is larger than that of every movie the character has headlined to date



"There are games that will exceed that number," Layden says, meaning budgets in the region of \$300m. He points to the resources required to populate a team of the scale currently at work on *GTAV*

PRODUCTION LINE

Shawn Layden says that in the PS2 days it was reasonable to approve production for a dozen games budgeted at around \$6/7m each and then take your chances, the hits making up for the duds. NDreams' Patrick O'Lunaigh supports a similar approach today: "It's about each game finding success on its own terms. We're seeing more developers and publishers spreading their bets to improve sustainability and give us excellent games that vary greatly in scope, style and team size." For the biggest names, though, taking chances is no longer an option. The result, Layden says, is a glut of sequels and copycats with easy "comparables" already in the market, allowing purse-string holders to set their forecasts accordingly.

by everyone." That last bit is, surely, vital. As Harris acknowledges, videogames have a long history of embracing technological advances, especially ones that promise "bigger, better, faster, cheaper", and he doesn't expect this to be any different. "If it hasn't happened already, I expect to see commercially viable, 'fully AI-generated' games – whatever that means, it will certainly be claimed – in the indie space."

Rose is in agreement. "I think the truth is that AI is going to leak into videogame development, whether people like it or not," he says. "We'll definitely see more studios using AI more openly in their games in the coming year, which will lay the foundation for them using AI more and more in the coming years. Some studios will use it in horrible, garbage ways, and others will try to be more moral about it. But either way, it's happening."

When it comes to the question of what this might look like, Layden expects to see AI used to speed up processes in quality assurance and level design, under the watchful eye of a human. "Someone described it to me [like this], and I think it's very apt: AI is like a really good intern with lots of Red Bull," he says. "You can point them at a thing, and they'll just run for the hills and go after it – but you've got to check all the work." He provides the example of asking an AI to produce

the basic outline of an environment such as Khartoum in 1690, then sending in people to clean it up. "In my career, I've paid at least five or six times for artists to model Manhattan. I would like a world where I don't have to pay for Manhattan to be remodelled yet again. Can't we just get that off the shelf?"

What about the concern that AI will eliminate jobs, particularly junior roles for artists or QA testers? "Whenever new tech comes into the space, sometimes it obviates certain roles in the studio, but it creates other roles in the studio as well," Layden says. He

suggests we'll see new roles such as 'prompt engineer', or people who review the output of AI. "It will create more jobs as it eliminates – not unlike automation in the factory 50 years ago."

Which is cold comfort, of course, to those made redundant over the past 12 months. "There's more to this than simple incompetence and bastardry," Harris says of the underlying causes. "Although those often play their part." Soaring interest rates have made loans more expensive to repay, and harder to come by, resulting in a 79 per cent drop in funding for game-related startups in 2023, according to

Crunchbase data. Dinsey puts it bluntly: "We just all got a bit fat and stupid after mega-growth through the pandemic, then cash suddenly wasn't cheap any more."

So, what next? Harris expects the job losses to continue. "One can only

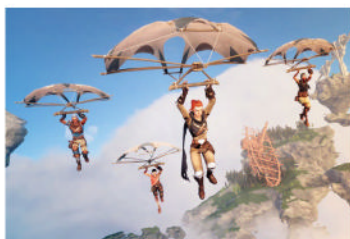
hope it's not as bad as 2023," he says, although the early signs aren't good – as E394 went to press, Unity announced 1,800 job cuts, roughly a quarter of its workforce. Layden predicts that things will improve, but not until around April or May. O'Lunaigh likewise expects things to start

turning around towards the middle of the year, as redundancies slow and the industry starts to become more bullish. "While the tough times may not be over just yet, I don't see a crash coming."

Dinsey agrees that we've probably weathered the worst of it. "Much of the industry is already flattened out, improving efficiency and reducing risk," he says. "I've been around long enough to see the cycle before. It starts with game cancellations, then layoffs, then heartbreaking closures, plus mergers and opportunistic IP swoops. But the business always comes back stronger overall and

"We'll definitely see more studios using AI more openly in their games in the coming year"

The Last Of Us Part II surely recouped its budget, selling 10m copies across two years – a number that will be boosted by the PS5 remaster



FROM TOP Challenges continue to affect both big and small game companies: *Broken Roads* was set to be published by TinyBuild-owned Versus Evil before its closure; Bossa laid off staff and sold the *Surgeon Simulator* rights to help fund work on *Lost Skies*; and First Contact, creator of the *Firewall* games, announced its closure at the start of 2024

keeps growing." Layden agrees: "The pendulum goes over here, and then it goes over there, and it always comes back." He thinks the current cutbacks are a correction after overexpansion during the pandemic. "If you take a look at some of the numbers associated with the industry today and compare it to 2019 numbers, it may be a normalisation to that level."

Rose, in contrast, is considerably more pessimistic. "Unfortunately, the redundancies will continue and probably will get worse. 2023 was just the beginning," he says. "I'd expect quite a number of studios to announce their closure this year too." He sees those ballooning top-end budgets as a symptom of malaise. "I know why it's happening: people with money think that the way to solve a decline in sales is to pump more money into making sales go up again. But it doesn't work that way most of the time! We're heading for a crash, and there will be more casualties along the way."

Rose doesn't expect those casualties to be limited to the obvious big spenders. "I think the indie publisher space is about to implode," he says. "A bunch of small publishers took tons of funding during COVID, or went public, or just hired way too many people. Now their sales have tanked, and they are all on life support. I'll bet at least three major indie publishers will announce huge downsizing or their

closure this year." The figures don't look good. Devolver Digital's share price has been plummeting for 18 months – at the time of writing, it's an order of magnitude below the 2022 peak. TinyBuild, which has seen its share price drop by over 95 per cent in the past 12 months, announced the closure of Versus Evil, an indie publisher it had acquired in 2021, on the last working day before Christmas.

"I think the business model is broken," Layden declares. He draws a comparison to the studio system of early Hollywood, where "you've got carpenters, electricians and painters, and they're just sitting around waiting to be told to paint a set." He envisages a shift towards the model that's more common today, where "every movie is its own company", the necessary staff accumulating around a project and then dispersing once it's done.

Whatever the next step might look like, Layden reckons 2023 was a wakeup call for a lot of people. "Generative AI, and the understanding that we just can't spend our way into the new generation – people are getting their head around that," he says. "I think 2024 is going to be a year of hard transition. I think there are some who are going to understand the changes that need to be made to be successful in this field. And I think there'll be others who are just going to ride their business model into the dirt." ■



Mike Rose, founder of No More Robots, and Patrick O'Lunaigh, CEO of NDreams

Taken to Task

How opportunity for improvisation is helping
TV's most beloved gameshow work in VR

Videogames based on TV shows don't have a great track record, especially when the original property is a gameshow. When we put this to Scallywag Arcade's **Niall Taylor**, currently responsible for making a videogame based on a TV gameshow, we're surprised at how quickly he agrees. "Oh, a hundred per cent. I mean, just licensed videogames [as a whole], there are some fantastic ones now, but if you enter that realm, there's generally a bias against you right from the start."

With *Taskmaster* VR, though, Taylor and team have the benefit of "unlimited access to the behind-the-scenes of the show". They've visited on filming days, taken 3D scans of the Taskmaster House, and picked the brains of its production staff, including creator Alex Horne. But what really sets this project apart, in Taylor's mind, is the source material he's working with: "I keep telling Alex: he is a game designer."

The show's core is, essentially, a compilation of minigames. Horne is primarily designing them to be watched rather than played, but his finest work leaves room for improvised solutions, in the manner of those found in *Tears Of The Kingdom*. "Place these three exercise balls on the yoga mat on the top of that hill", to pick an example from the second series, isn't that far from a Korok Seed challenge.

Indeed, Taylor cites *Zelda* as an inspiration. "We are *not* that ambitious," he adds. "But we talked about a lot of

games in that vein." Another influence: 2017's *Prey*. "It's an immersive sim with a fairly linear way through it... unless you shoot the Gloo Gun through a letterbox, and hit a computer screen with a Nerf dart to unlock the door – and suddenly you've sequence-skipped six hours of the game." We'd like to see Greg Davies debate *that* one in the studio.

For all the similarities, however, Taskmaster's games are designed to be single-use – a challenge when adapting into a medium that generally relies on repeatable loops. After convincing production company Avalon Television that Scallywag was the right developer for the job, this was the next challenge for Taylor and team. "The initial pitch, he explains, was, 'Everybody wants to be on Taskmaster – how do we make that happen?'"

"Initially, we were talking about a *Jackbox*-style party game, which seems like an obvious answer. And then you realise how heavily edited Taskmaster is." For TV, each contestant's attempt is cut down into a neat VT package, which wouldn't be possible in a live multiplayer setting. Watching someone else complete a task for five straight minutes could grow tedious.

"Johnny Vegas is funny. Johnny Vegas has been funny for 30 years. He can make rolling an egg down a hill funny, and any point where he is not funny, he has a team of some of the best editors in TV behind him," Taylor says. "How do

LIKE CLOCKWORK To help capture the distinctive voice of Taskmaster's comedy, Scallywag Arcade has employed the talents of Dan Marshall and Ben Ward, who most recently collaborated on 2020's excellent *Lair Of The Clockwork God*. Taylor recounts his thought process: "Who's making that very specific kind of British funny [in videogames] and loves Taskmaster?" Marshall and Ward, he concluded, were right at the centre of that Venn diagram, and their work showed a similar sense of humour: "Surrealism, but also very deadpan at times". Initially brought in as narrative consultants, the pair have become increasingly involved over the course of development, writing dialogue and designing tasks, with Ward joining the studio full-time.

we make your average gamer feel as funny as Johnny Vegas?" He describes the solution as "reactive comedy". As opposed to similarly physics-based VR comedy games such as *What The Bat*, where the humour stems from what you're being asked to do, the "relatively simple tasks" here have been designed to allow players to be funny in how they solve them. And then, via avatars of Horne and Davies, rewarding that with contextual voice lines which respond to their approach. Which means, Taylor says, "having to try and predict every single possible way that you might complete that task, in order to write a joke for it."

This sounds particularly difficult in the case of the game's centrepiece "sandbox" tasks. Taylor won't be drawn on any specific examples, but he explains that each in-game episode will be a mix of shorter minigames – simple puzzles and "fairground stalls", as they're known internally – and longer ones that give you access to the entire house and grounds, with "hundreds of interactive items", to improvise a solution. While Scallywag hopes to anticipate even the most outlandish ideas and be ready with a custom gag, Taylor says he won't be too disappointed if players come up with ones they'd never accounted for. "That's true Taskmaster," he says. It's here, too, that those *TOTK* and *Prey* comparisons come in: "I want to see videos to just make you go, 'Sorry, what, you could do this?'" With a core team of ten, this is ambitious for any game, let alone a TV gameshow tie-in. But then, that's not how Taylor sees it: "This isn't an adaptation. This is Taskmaster, just in VR." ■



Niall Taylor, head of games at Scallywag

While *Taskmaster VR*'s "core experience" is singleplayer, Taylor says, "there is another facet of the game that we aren't ready to talk about yet"



HOUSE SHARING

The benefits of an all-access pass



One thing Taylor learned from visiting the Taskmaster set: "They must film two or three times more tasks than get shown. Some of them just don't work." While his team don't have that luxury, they have been able to prototype on the ground: "Right, I've got this idea for a task that starts in the caravan – ah, right, it takes too long to get to the Greg statue." The space has also been digitised using a Matterport 3D scanner, but there are benefits to visiting in person. "Andy [Cartwright, TV series producer] will be there, and you'll mention an idea for a task, and he's able to say, 'Well, OK, we've tried something similar that didn't work'."



The Scallywag Arcade team, pictured, had an advantage not always available to developers creating games based on TV and film: hands-on access to locations and original materials



Recalibrating PlayStation 5

How **Sony's PlayStation Access** makes its flagship console friendlier to more players

There has long been an imbalance in the relationship between videogame controllers and the people who use them, with players having to adjust to the hardware rather than the other way around. Sony's PlayStation Access controller, launched in December at £80, tackles the imbalance head-on.

The PS5 hardware is Sony's first dedicated peripheral with inclusivity and accessibility designed into its DNA. While there can never be a single silver-bullet accessibility controller that meets the specific needs of all players, the PlayStation Access

approach is a success, with a distinct design, excellent software, a multi-faceted kit-like build, and community consultation in its development process.

The hardware is built around two circles: a large unit that houses nine main buttons (eight surrounding a central button), four industry-standard 3.5mm ports for other specialist devices, and a USB-C port; and a smaller unit housing a joystick. Arranged on one plane to increase usability, it can be easily mounted onto surfaces such as wheelchair trays.

Since it can be oriented with the stick facing any direction according to a user's needs, the controller's overall design offers flexibility from the outset. The circular button arrangement also highlights a weakness, however, in that engaging with some requires having to reach over others. Deactivating buttons can mitigate the issue, but when the

number of controls is already limited, doing so can sacrifice functionality.

As you'd expect from Sony-made hardware, the buttons themselves perform exceptionally. Inspired by mechanical keyboards, each is easy to actuate, with a satisfying click. Both the buttons and the joystick come in different forms, too: the latter can take the shape of a tall, arcade-style joystick, a regular PS5 thumbstick, or a mid-height conical stick, while the former can be 'made' with one of 19 button caps. This kit-like approach, presenting a range of attachments and physical forms, is a welcome one, empowering players to create a controller that's best for their needs, rather than trying to be a one-size-fits-all solution.

The Access package is elevated further by some thoughtful inclusions on the software side. From

controller orientation to specific button-press types, and from creating optimal personalisations to storing multiple button profiles, the PS5 utility is deep and impressive. A toggle function, for example, allows players to have a gun aimed or an accelerator pedal constantly depressed by the software instead of requiring a button to be actively pressed. You can also remap buttons to match specific hand positions, disable certain buttons, and combine multiple inputs to single button presses.

Importantly, the Access controller hasn't been designed as a 'one-and-

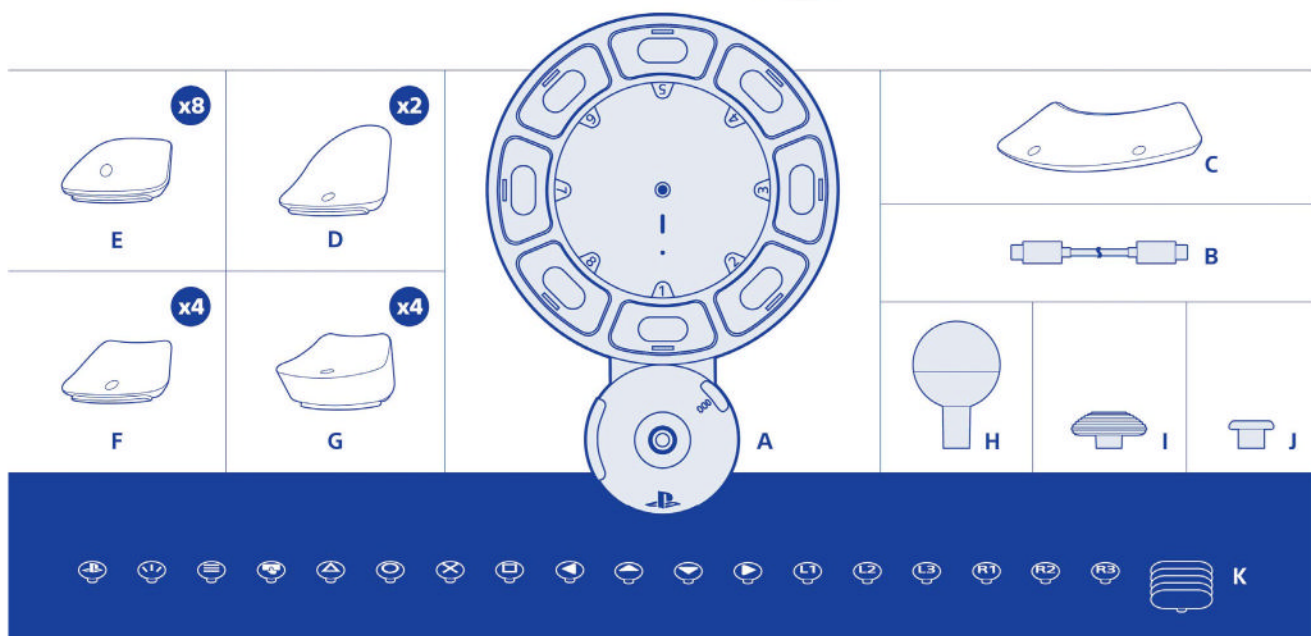
GAME-CHANGERS
Reconfiguring games' entire control schemes through the PS5 companion software to fit personal needs for accessibility, reach and ease of interaction is a groundbreaking demonstration of the Access hardware's functionality. Building a custom controller profile to blend a game's control scheme is as satisfying as executing in-game moves. The toggle function can be deployed to keep Aloy permanently aiming her bow in *Horizon: Forbidden West*, for instance, freeing up a digit or button press to use elsewhere, while multi-input skills such as Kratos' Spartan rage ability can be reduced to a single button press.

done' solution, but rather something to be used with other firstparty controllers via what Sony calls "collaborative use". While a single Access controller can't replace a DualSense in one fell swoop – which is a disappointment – deploying it alongside a standard PS5 controller enables players to remap and spread the controls of a specific game, or the functionality of a single DualSense. Using two Access units reveals the flexibility and versatility further as entire control schemes can be overhauled, rebuilt and tailored specifically for individual requirements, and unlocks the use of two joysticks to replicate a DualSense.

With multiple strings to its bow, the Access controller is a triumph – and quite different from Microsoft's Xbox Adaptive Controller counterpart. The latter, with fewer buttons but a greater number of ports, is more like a 'passive' hub around which to build a setup, whereas the Access controller has a greater emphasis on active use, as though it should be the central unit of a setup, with other peripherals to augment it, or used in concert with other firstparty controllers.

With unique hardware now available from both Microsoft and Sony, it's clear that accessibility considerations in videogames have stepped up to a new level. We're not confident that Nintendo will follow suit any time soon, but it seems likely that the journeys for Xbox and PlayStation won't begin and end here.

With two industry leaders taking such a clear stance – via not-insignificant R&D investments – hopefully developers will be increasingly inspired to raise their own games in helping everyone to play. ■



FEAT OF CLAY

Plasticine stop-motion horror adventure Visceratum promises to disturb and delight in equal measure

There's a good chance you encountered an Aardman animation over the recent festive break, whether you stumbled across Wallace & Gromit while channel hopping or sat down in front of Chicken Run: Dawn Of The Nugget on Netflix. But the inherent uncanniness of stop-motion animation arguably makes it better suited to horror. Forget Laika's family-friendly chills; Phil Tippett's Mad God (as far from A Close Shave as it's possible to get) is set to haunt our dreams for a good while yet.

Michael Rfdshir clearly agrees: he's spent several years hand-crafting this unsettling successor to 2020 short *Isolomus*. As a hooded biohacker, your goal is to infiltrate the eponymous corporation in a game that purposely eschews puzzles and twitch platforming in favour of something more experiential. Seeking to confront the horror within us all, Rfdshir blends the absurdist with the earnest – Giger, Cronenberg and Lynch can all be found within the mix. You'll be able to wrap yourself in its tentacled embrace on PC soon. ■





Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"Leaks impact us, force us to change plans, discard ideas, create assets for new beats or to answer concerns that shouldn't exist. It impacts our health, our jobs."

Arkane Lyon studio director **Dinga Bakaba**, currently at work on *Blade*, has had enough of videogame industry hacking bullshit at this point



"We're thrilled to announce that *Starfield* has won Most Innovative Gameplay in the Steam Awards!"

Is it possible that *Starfield*'s Twitter handler might not be in on a not-very-funny joke?



"I have absolutely nothing to announce, really. I'm just an unemployed person!"

Hideki Kamiya drops some harsh truths to followers of his fledgling YouTube channel

"We also intend to be aggressive in applying AI and other cutting-edge technologies to both our content development and publishing functions."

Yep, says president **Takashi Kiryu**, of course Square Enix can find a way of dulling the lustre of some of gaming's most beloved series



ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Jaws
Manufacturer Stern

How is it possible that the movie that invented the concept of the summer blockbuster, with licensing extending to everything from lunchboxes to a theme-park attraction, never became a pinball table? It seems stranger still when you consider that *Jaws* arrived in 1975, before the videogame revolution properly took hold, leaving ample room for some shark-infused silver ball to clean up. On first impressions, though, the wait appears to be worth it, Stern's interpretation delivering on just about every detail from the movie, including John Williams' infamous musical score, while adding new, custom speech from actor Richard Dreyfuss. As with some of Stern's previous output, the game is available in Pro, Premium and Limited Edition models, priced from \$6,999 to \$9,499. For the full-fat version, expect upgraded audio, anti-reflection pinball playfield glass, and that all-important certificate of authenticity to prove just how deep your pockets go.



SECRETMODE LITTLE ORPHEUS

JOIN OUR BOLD YET BARGAINING HERO AS HE EXPLORES LOST CIVILIZATIONS, UNDERSEA KINGDOMS, PREHISTORIC JUNGLES AND LANDS BEYOND IMAGINATION.



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SECRETMODE ETERNAL THREADS

A SINGLE-PLAYER, FIRST-PERSON STORY-DRIVEN PUZZLE GAME OF TIME MANIPULATION, CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE.

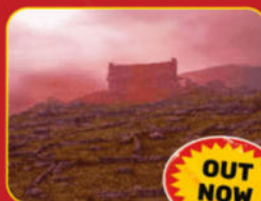


OUT NOW

COMING SOON TO PS5

SECRETMODE DEAR ESTHER

A STUNNINGLY REALISED WORLD, A REMOTE AND DESOLATE ISLAND SOMEWHERE IN THE OUTER REBIDES.



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE ZOO REDIMENSIONED

EXPLORE VIBRANT RETRO LANDSCAPES AND TAKE DOWN MENACING BOSSES IN A MODERN REIMAGINING OF THE CLASSIC PLATFORMER ADVENTURE ZOO.



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE HER MAJESTY'S SPIFFING

JOIN CAPTAIN FRANK LEE ENGLISH AND HIS TRUSTED COLLEAGUE, ALICE, AS THEY TRAVEL THROUGH THE COSMOS IN SEARCH OF PLANETS TO CLAIM FOR A NEW GALACTIC BRITISH EMPIRE!



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE MARS HORIZON 2 THE SEARCH FOR LIFE

LEAD YOUR SPACE AGENCY IN THE SEARCH FOR LIFE IN THIS AUTHENTIC STRATEGY SIMULATION GAME. INVESTIGATE THE SOLAR SYSTEM AND COLLECT EVIDENCE OF LIFE.



COMING SOON

SECRETMODE WOBBLEDOGS

A 3D PET SIMULATOR WHERE YOU RAISE YOUR OWN PERSONAL HERO OF MUTATING DOGS. PHYSICALLY SIMULATED ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THEIR GUTS!



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE TURBO GOLF RACING

UNLOCK UPGRADES AND DRIVE YOUR WAY TO ACTION-PACKED GOLF RACING GLORY!



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE SNAKE PASS

SLITHER, COIL, AND CLIMB YOUR WAY TO THE TOP OF HAVEN TUN IN THIS ONE-OF-A-KIND PLATFORMER ADVENTURE.



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE A LITTLE TO THE LEFT

A COZY PUZZLE GAME THAT HAS YOU SORT, STACK, AND ORGANIZE HOUSEHOLD ITEMS.



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE STAMPEDE: RACING ROYALE

AVOID ELIMINATION AND FIGHT YOUR WAY TO THE FRONT OF THE HERD IN THE SCRAMBLE TO BE CROWNED CHAMPION!



COMING SOON

SECRETMODE LODDLernaut

PICK UP TRASH, EXPLORE THE VIBRANT WATERS, AND TAKE CARE OF AXOLOTL-LIKE ALIEN CREATURES!



OUT NOW

SECRETMODE STILL WAKES THE DEEP

NAVIGATE A COLLAPSING OIL RIG TO SAVE YOUR CREW FROM AN OTHERWORLDLY HORROR ON THE EDGE OF ALL LOGIC AND REALITY.



COMING SOON

SECRETMODE PARCEL CORPS

HIDE ALONG WALLS, GRIND RAILS, AND STARTLE PIGEONS ON YOUR WAY TO CORPORATION-TOPPLING DOMINATION.



COMING SOON

SECRETMODE MAKE WAY

SPEED AROUND LOOPS, DRIFT AROUND MELTER SKELTERS, AND UNLEASH WACKY WEAPONRY IN THIS MODERN TAKE ON CLASSIC TOP-DOWN MULTIPLAYER RACING GAMES.



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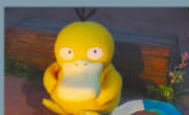
Developers: The Chinese Room (Little Orpheus, Dear Esther, Still Wakes The Deep), Cosmonaut (Eternal Threads), Sumo Digital Academy (Zoo Redimensioned), Sumo Digital (Snake Pass), Billy Goat Entertainment (Her Majesty's Spiffing, Parcel Corps), Auroch Digital (Mars Horizon 2), Animal Uprising (Wobbledogs), Hugecalf (Turbo Golf Racing), Max Inferno (A Little To The Left), Sumo Leamington (Stampede: Racing Royale), Moon Lagoon (Loddernaut), Ice Beam (Make Way)

WEB GAME

[Classified] Of 2015

bit.ly/detectiveschool

The subgenre created by *Return Of The Obra Dinn* is now big enough to birth its own event: December's The Case Of The Thinky Game Jam challenged developers to make their own deductive logic puzzles in the space of a fortnight. The submissions range from various *Golden Idol* reskins to broader interpretations of the remit, including a written riddle by Draknek & Friends and a tabletop RPG scenario. This entry is an unexpected highlight, transplanting to a school yearbook the premise of matching faces to names. The theme proves fertile ground for identifying clues: social cliques, romantic connections, class-drawn pranks, and so on. But as you flip through photos, they take a strange turn – your first hint of a shadowy subplot that lingers in the background, even once the more mundane mysteries have been solved.



TV

Pokémon Concierge

bit.ly/fuzzymon

It would be easy to dismiss this stop-motion animated mini-series as blandly undemanding kids' fare. At first blush, its hand-crafted creatures boast an attention to detail that is comparatively lacking in the script. But as high-strung Haru begins her new role at this idyllic resort, the story becomes a gentle paean to the value of self-care, touching upon the difficulties (and benefits) of learning to switch off in our always-connected world. It feels tailor-made for a 'cosy' videogame adaptation, too – Switch's successor should have the horsepower to do justice to those Fuzzy Felt textures.

WEB GAME

Paku Paku

bit.ly/chopac

Namco's arcade classic has been remixed umpteen times, its pill-gobbling formula embellished in a variety of ways. Kenta Cho's worryingly compulsive take adopts the opposite approach, downsizing the playspace to a single wraparound passage as a legally distinct green Pac-Man faces a lone ghost, with the player's input reduced to one command: turn. It requires more thought than you'd imagine: your pursuer moves quicker than you and doesn't stay prey for long once you've munched a power pill. Racing after them, then, isn't always wise, and you'll want to keep to the middle before their replacement shows up. Often, it becomes a game of chicken, as you purposely attract the ghost's attention so it can give chase, leaving the last pills ungarded so you can grab them and reset the corridor.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

Some of the other things on our minds when we weren't doing everything else

HARDWARE

Analogue Duo

bit.ly/necgain

Konami's PC Engine Mini range offered a cheap and cheerful opportunity for anyone who'd grown up with a SNES or Mega Drive to finally get a taste for NEC's winningly cute approach to console design. Now, nearly four years later, we have a new piece of hardware that can play the same games (and a lot more besides), but from an entirely different perspective. Analogue's Duo is aimed at the seasoned PC Engine fan, and assumes that you will already have your own controller – and of course a library of games to run on it, whether they're on HuCard or CD-ROM. Crucially, all of the many PCE formats are supported, and naturally everything is powered by FPGA hardware to ensure flawless accuracy. A surprisingly extensive suite of display options rounds out a package that consolidates Analogue's reputation as the enthusiast's choice when it comes to revisiting old favourites on non-native hardware.



continue

Cox fighting

Bandai Namco convinces Logan Roy himself to outline the *Tekken* story so far

School of block

Jack Black is reportedly cast as Steve in Warner Bros' forthcoming *Minecraft* movie

Print money

A stack of mid-'00s *Edges* makes a cameo appearance in buzzy Brit flick *Saltburn*

One in 5

Immortality arrives on Sony's console with new haptic and controller speaker features

quit

Unhappy new year

Unity gets 2024 off to the worst possible start with a staggering 1,800 layoffs

Streaming disservice

Likewise Twitch with 500 job losses, equating to 35 per cent of its total workforce

Unspeakable

Game performers voice concerns over SAG-AFTRA's unexpected AI agreement

Indie bin

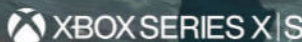
Microsoft's ID@Xbox account is rightly lambasted for using AI art in a promotional tweet



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Issue 393

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins an exclusive **Edge** T-shirt



(Nothing but) flowers

With all the disappointment surrounding The Game Awards this year, I wanted to chime in with a suggestion and ask how you would like the show to change in future.

The Game Awards is now so focused on advertising the games of tomorrow that there is no space to celebrate the games released this year. The few developers invited to the stage to receive awards were quickly smuggled away. In fact, we spent more time with Gonzo (a Muppet) talking about his favourite videogame chicken than we did any developer receiving an award.

The gaming industry has always struggled to communicate how difficult it can be to make a game. The number of people and the amount of effort that it takes are often forgotten, which makes it even more disappointing that in an event where we should be celebrating their achievements, we hardly see or hear from them.

Personally, I would love to see more features highlighting why a game has been nominated. Let me peek behind the curtain and see what goes into the audio design for *Hi-Fi Rush*, or how *Forza Motorsport* has been designed with accessibility in mind, but most importantly show me who is doing it, and why it's significant.

When that context is missing, the awards become a list of names devoid of any real meaning, used to promote the next crop of games rather than celebrate the ones already in our libraries. Not to add to your workload, but if **Edge** were designing and curating The Game Awards, how would you go about it? And how would you make it a more meaningful show?

Rhys Haskell

Featurettes for each nominee? Was this year's ceremony not long enough for you? In seriousness, we're of the apparently old-fashioned opinion that awards should be

more about celebrating and rewarding craft than advertising forthcoming attractions. We may disagree with some of its choices, but BAFTA tends to get closer to the ideal.

Psycho killer

In *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*, Ellen cannot interact with yellow objects because of having been raped by someone in yellow overalls. Once the player overcomes her past trauma, she is able to venture deeper into the colourful pyramid. It's long been my favourite example of narrative and mechanics working together in unison.

Naughty Dog games have often been criticised for not caring much about this.

Heck, they even gave an achievement – 'Ludonarrative dissonance' – when you have Drake kill a thousand people. This never bothered me much because the *Uncharted* series is so over the top – I couldn't expect it to take the player seriously if it wasn't going to take itself seriously. But *The Last Of Us* seemed to have a more serious tone, so I

thought this might be different.

The lacklustre combat didn't help, but what really made progress a slog was having to play Joel, an egotistical maniac in whose shoes I didn't feel comfortable walking. I kept reminding myself that his condition was like Ellen's: he's like that because he lost his daughter and the reason you're forced to play a jerk is because he's bound to his trauma. Ultimately, I figured my only choice as a player was to either carry on or just stop. I preferred the latter.

The accolades kept piling up. An **Edge** 10, number two in **Edge**'s all-time list in 2015, and recently a higher ranking than *Deus Ex* in 2023. Not having finished such a 'great' game had gnawed on my consciousness for a decade. Thus, I gave it another shot. I figured I was in a win-win situation: either it's really as bad as I thought it was, and that



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Discuss gaming topics with
fellow Edge readers

would mean I was right the whole time. Or it was really good, and then I would enjoy it! Winning! Also, I had been preparing for this moment the last couple of years. Triple-A cinematic blockbusters have never been my cup of tea, so I beat dozens of them: *Jedi: Fallen Order*, *Uncharted 4*, *A Plague Tale*, *GOW*, *RDR*, *COD*, *AC*, etc. Perhaps their language, their passion, their secret, could be revealed to me. Sadly, nothing was. (In case you're wondering why I haven't been sending many letters recently, it's because I've been playing soulless commercial cash grabs with nothing interesting to write about.) But what I did obtain was a level of tolerance for the mundane and the nonsensical. I felt ready to push on.

The first time I stopped playing *TLOU* was after Ellie saves Joel and is allowed to carry a gun. On one hand, this is great writing: Joel learns to trust her and now the gameplay is different, easier. But on the other hand, it was not me, the player, who gained her trust. No, it was the Joel in the cutscenes who got pushed off a ladder: an event forced upon me by the developers. I never needed Ellie's help in combat. I felt so disrespected that I quit.

This time around I got farther and almost enjoyed playing it. I got to be Ellie, and her actions made sense: sure, Joel was a criminal, but he didn't deserve to die by starvation and cold. Yes, the amount of folks I had to kill was absurd, but I had become numb to triple-A logic by now. Playing again as Joel was harsh: no option to listen to Ellie's plight to save humanity. Again, telling myself this man is hurt. It makes sense. He would murder every last human being if it meant saving her life. I abided.

But it was the last part that stung. I knew that Joel had lied about the operation. Looking at Ellie's expressions, I figured she knew, too. Playing her again, I am asked to grab his hand to climb a ledge. I so badly did not trust this psychopath. I did the logical thing, turned around and ran back to the car. Of course, I wasn't given the option to ride

away. But I had to try. After a moment I figured I'd head back. Perhaps it was curiosity, perhaps there was a faint hope that my partner loved me, genuinely, enough to respect me with the truth. The dangling arm seemed symbolic enough. I'll bite.

You already know how this ends. A part of me wants to play *Part II* just to see the motherfucker die. But I hear it's not as good as the first, and I detested the first, so I'll pass. I'm playing *Pathologic 2* and I'm feeling much, much better already.

Robert August de Meijer

[Well, we're sure no one will have any objections whatsoever to your considered appraisal. Although perhaps it's another Naughty Dog game you should revisit...](#)

I feel it in my heart

Over the break I got a large amount of time to play games outside of work, which was refreshing after working on walkthroughs during the past two winter holidays. One series I started was *Jak & Daxter*. I never got a chance to play the series when younger because I never had a PlayStation 2, so I'm making up for lost time. I am currently on *Jak 2*, and the shift of the game is enthralling. At the start, you're placed in a police state with the authoritarian rule of law; where the ruler stops the flow of water to civilians on the off chance it will harm the rebels.

Seeing Jak having to face such intense trauma in his life at a young age really helps me relate to him. He's (understandably) untrusting of others, angrier, and has PTSD. I hope he gets some sort of resolve, and peace. Others treat him differently, but Jak knows he could not have survived if he hadn't changed his mindset, strategy, and ideology to face these new trials and tribulations. Effectively, he's had to grow up very quickly.

It is interesting to play a series now that I had missed as a kid and be able to view through a critical lens. I would not have seen these aspects if I'd had a PS2 like many of my classmates growing up. I love my new PS5,

and getting to play older games I missed on Sony's previous consoles is one reason why.

Veerender Singh Jubbal

Seen and not seen

Stop me if this sounds familiar. You've loved games for most of your life, and kept on top of them for years. Once upon a time, it was easy to know the medium. You had an opinion on each major release, even if you didn't play it. One magazine was all you needed to understand all of the PS2's library. As time marched on, the advances were astounding. There were more games; they were bigger and better. Before you knew it, your backlog was overflowing. Years passed and games you were excited to play new are now long beyond that dreaded ten-years-makes-it-retro point.

Gaming became a stressor for me, since keeping up with discourse demanded dedication and sacrifice. A weekend with friends is another promising indie unfinished, and a week away kills the fresh memory of a JRPG's story, rendering a 30-hour save worthless. Recently, I understood what had changed — to me, anyway. Gaming is no longer one subculture, but a colossus comprising many others. For those of us in our 30s and older, who used to know it all, this is new. We have to specialise, to pick our subclass.

So *Cyberpunk 2077* goes unplayed. As does *Baldur's Gate 3* and *Spider-Man 2*. Great games, I'm sure, but my heart is too full. I no longer love gaming as I once did, but in accepting that, I can love games more. To *Blasphemous 2*, *Pseudoregalia*, *Hi-Fi Rush*, *Harvestella*, *Dragon's Dogma*, *Ace Combat 4*, even *ONGEKI* in arcades in Japan — my specific tastes are mine, and I now have the time to appreciate each of them fully. *GTAVI* will come and go, and I won't spare it a thought. May each reader find their own niche.

Matt Lagan

[Rejecting FOMO as an act of self-care? We'll have a bit of that. And with this in mind, we're sure no other readers will complain if we send you an Edge T-shirt. ■](#)



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

Book II of Milton's *Paradise Lost* sees the gatekeeper of Hell, named Sin, revealing to Satan that she is his daughter, and that their incestuous relationship resulted in their offspring, Death. When she finishes this revelation, Milton writes, "the subtle Fiend his lore / Soon learned, now milder, and thus answered smooth..."; promising to set her and all the other devils free from their "dark and dismal house of pain".

'Lore', in this context, means 'education', 'teaching', or 'lesson', its original (often religious) sense from Old English 'lare', which in turn derived from the same Germanic root as 'to learn'. Only in the 18th century did 'lore' come to mean something like "the body of traditional facts, anecdotes, or beliefs relating to some particular subject" (OED), as in "Grecian or Roman lore", "sacred lore", and even, in Tom Brown's *Schooldays*, "the lore of birds' eggs".

It's this more modern sense, then, that informs the use of 'lore' in the context of videogames, where it is the lore designer's job to fill out the background details of the universe. Is there something cringeworthy about the appropriation of this powerful old word to describe what is so often quasi-Tolkienesque drivel? Well, many words have weakened in force over the centuries, and for those allergic to tales of leather, elves and potions, it might nonetheless be interesting to take a more inclusive view of what videogame 'lore' could mean.

First of all, of course, many stories and imaginary worlds require their creators to have shared reference to an authoritative set of background facts in order to ensure consistency. For TV shows this has long been called the show's 'bible', harkening back once again to the sense of lore as religious doctrine. One presumes that, similarly, either in the vast memory palace of Hideo Kojima's head or in towering sheaves of documents, there is a bible of *Metal Gear Solid* lore, which would be indispensable for one of the most self-referential videogame series in existence.



To create an entire mythology from scratch is almost an impossible job for any writer who is not literally JRR Tolkien

But lore doesn't necessarily have to be thought of as simply 'stuff that previously happened in this fictional universe'. Arguably it is the right term for any kind of background narrative or information that informs the present tense of the game. So it made a difference, when my nephew was battering me at *FC 24* over Christmas, that the teams featured real-life players, and that it was Paris St Germain who were having a horrible time under my inept management. The lore of the FIFA games is the world of football itself.

To create an entire mythology from scratch, meanwhile, is almost an impossible

job for any writer who is not literally JRR Tolkien or George Lucas, which is why the lore of modern games so often ends up as tedious fanfic fantasy. Easier and more potent to raid the "myth-kitty", as Philip Larkin once put it, and base one's game on established bodies of time-tested lore, as enterprising ZX Spectrum developers once did in the 1980s with adventure games centred on Celtic mythology (*Tir Na Nog* and *Dun Darach*), or the Norse gods (*Valhalla*).

But it's equally viable to have no lore at all. Indeed, some of the most famous stories gain power for having no detailed backstory. In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy does not deign to tell the reader what exactly happened to create the desolate post-apocalypse through which his father and son wander. To do so would dilute the mythic force of the narrative. Indeed, in literary studies the demand that there should be a definitive answer to any footling question of detail about the storyworld has become known as the 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' question, after a celebrated 1933 lecture by LC Knights which mocked the naive realism of a certain sort of 19th-century critic.

Similarly, there is no lore in my favourite game of last year, *Humanity*. There is none in *Dead Nation*, either, or even in a classic of narrative implication such as *Ico*, where it is precisely the lack of explicit lore that imbues the architecture with wonder and menace. Of course, there is the popular and pleasantly sedate genre of story/puzzle game where the whole point is to uncover the backstory via snippets of diary entries, audio files and so on, casting the player explicitly as lore detective. Here, lore has its authentic place, but it needn't have a place in every game. Leave it up to the player's imagination more often, and she will write her own lore. Perhaps it will be better, and surely it will be more personal, than what the designers could have come up with.

Steven Poole is a writer, composer and author whose books include *Trigger Happy 2.0*, *Unspeaking*, and *Rethink*

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ALEX SPENCER

The Outer Limits

Journeys to the farthest reaches of interactive entertainment

Question: is 35 years old too late to start playing Dungeons & Dragons in its traditional tabletop form? Very probably, but more and more it feels like a blindspot that needs addressing. For years I've nodded along quietly as videogame developers explain how in their work they're just trying to capture the sensation of their regular D&D session, but in 2023 the game became an unavoidable part of mainstream pop culture. The film parlayed its setting into a surprisingly enjoyable romp. *Baldur's Gate 3* demonstrated the pleasures of its ruleset to those of us with no tolerance for watching or listening to other people play an RPG. D&D has even made its way into party small talk – the *other* kind of party.

Over beers and loud pop music, an acquaintance enthuses about the campaign she's been DMing. I reply that, hey, I've just started running one too. Then hastily explain that it's not actually D&D but rather "a kind of deconstruction of it". Cue boos and hisses from everyone within earshot. And rightly so, although in truth this isn't some hipster-cred stance. It's just, more or less, the only tabletop RPG I've ever played.

The game in question, *Die*, is a frankly ridiculous place to start. Deeply in conversation with the tropes of D&D and its lineage, this is the equivalent of playing *Braid* and *Super Meat Boy* before you've ever even touched *Mario*. As for *why* it happened this way, well, my motivation was the same as that of any loot-hungry adventurer: gold. I first played *Die* as a freelance journalist, the commission enough to overcome my +3 resistance to the idea of pen-and-paper RPGs.

On first hearing about their existence from a schoolfriend, I was scared off by the misunderstanding that the process required donning a cape and strutting around talking like a vampire. Later, I was dissuaded by RPG systems as I knew them from videogames: a shorthand for stat increases and sacks of loot which can be tacked onto the side of another game. The origins of these things on the



This is the equivalent of playing *Braid* and *Super Meat Boy* before you've ever even touched *Mario*

tabletop were, surely, a solution to a problem most visually driven games don't face, a way of concretising the abstract, in described action. In *The Lord Of The Rings*, say, Tolkien gets to decide what Gandalf or Shelob or Sting can and cannot do at any given moment; when multiple parties are equally responsible for the narrative, you need a way of pinning down consensus reality.

There's a line in *Die*'s rulebook that had me reaching for the highlighter: "Games are conversations mediated by rules". This is remarkably similar to the definition I was already using to set the, ahem, limits of this

column: any activity done solely for pleasure, with an agreed-upon set of rules. (We'll find out together how far I can stretch that.) In the opening phases of a *Die* campaign – always my favourite part – the emphasis is squarely on the conversation side of that equation. Players are tasked with generating a social group, with the help of a few loose prompts – these are people who bonded over a shared fantasy of some form when they were younger, now reuniting after years apart.

It's a delightful creative process, one that has in previous sessions produced a band mourning the death of their singer, a school theatre club where no one ever made it beyond local am-dram productions, and a gang of kids who grew out of *Pokémon* and into underage drinking. Once you've agreed on a set of human-feeling characters, the GM assigns them RPG classes that riff on D&D stalwarts. That bossy would-be theatre director? They're now the Dictator, a twisted Bard whose voice can control people's emotions – if only *they* could fully control how. The PE teacher struggling to make ends meet? The Neo, a kind of robotic Rogue who not only desires gold but *needs* it, to keep their cyberpunk suit's lights on.

From there, via a quick spot of the kind of in-character LARPing I so feared as a teen, you end up playing something much closer to the RPGs everyone but me is familiar with. But even as more rules are layered on – stats, dice rolls, all the rest – everything is informed by the initial decisions you made as a group. The game world knits together from remnants of that shared fantasy along with personal details, meaning the GM's job is to listen to everyone, remember the smallest offhand comment, and find some way of paying it off down the line. Which is pretty much the magic of *Baldur's Gate 3*, of course, but also of a good conversation. Personally, I'd appreciate a few similar rules for not making a fool of myself at parties.

Alex Spencer is a level-four features ed who recently unlocked the Write In Singular Firstperson ability in the **Edge** skill tree.

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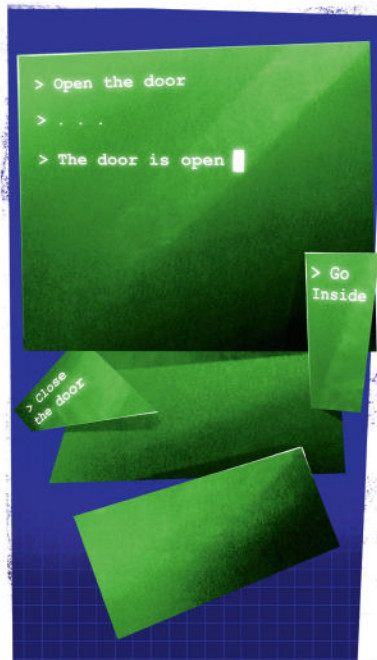
Narrative Engine

Write it like you stole it

As this is my first column in **Edge**, I thought I should introduce myself. Hello! I'm Jon Ingold, and I'm narrative director and co-founder of **Inkle**, which means that among other things I wrote or co-wrote all of Inkle's games. I'm also reasonably well known (amongst game writers, anyway) for a talk I gave about interactive dialogue, which suggested a way to use subtext when designing choices to make conversations more sparkly. As you might gather from all that, I consider myself more of a writer than a game designer, despite having (co-)designed a lot of games. So why don't I just bog off and write a book, eh?

Well, it's a habit, I suppose. I wrote my first computer game in a notebook long before my family owned any kind of computer to test it on. Somewhat later, I discovered Inform, a programming language dedicated to making text adventure games, like the ones made by (and built directly on the technology of) the '80s juggernaut Infocom, whose work, rather than *Mario*, *Zelda* or *Sonic*, represented my first real interaction with videogames. My brothers and I played all the Infocom games we could pirate onto our Amstrad PC 1512, including *Deadline*, a country-house murder mystery whose suspects moved around and could be manipulated; and *Infidel*, in which a doomed archaeologist deciphers ASCII-art hieroglyphics inside a buried pyramid. They cast long shadows: these are the games which directly inspired Inkle's titles *Overboard!* and *Heaven's Vault*.

They were games described in text and played via text. The player typed imperative commands such as OPEN THE FREEZER, REMOVE THE SWORDFISH and ATTACK THE POLICEMAN WITH THE FROZEN SWORDFISH, and the game would attempt to perform the action and describe the result. Internally, there was a complex world-state model but, obviously, a lot of the time it didn't work and it was easy to type a reasonable command that the game couldn't parse or process.



Infocom's games were substantially more interactive and responsive than their modern-day equivalents

The frustration of this parser system is now legendary, but the truth is as children we didn't notice it: as with any game, you quickly learned the boundaries of the simulation and they became insignificant compared to its freedoms. Never mind that you couldn't DISARM the grenade or UNPLUG the telephone; you could THROW the grenade and PICK UP the telephone, and that was enough. In fact, Infocom's games were substantially more interactive and responsive than their modern-day adventure equivalents: there were never any dogs you couldn't pet (well, TOUCH), and no doors you couldn't at

least try to open. If you saw a book, any book, you could open it, read it, and then, say, drop it down a well.

But the simulation wasn't the thing that I loved about Infocom. It was the *rhythm*: the back-and-forth conversation that developed between player and machine. The game would open with a *mise en scène*: *Plundered Hearts*, for example, begins with you captive aboard a pirate ship during a sea battle. The player — sans visuals — had to imagine the situation, think of a way forward, and translate it into a step that could be typed in — and, if your thinking was well-aligned, then the game would respond with sweet progress: the next beat of the story. The result, at its best, was a drip-feed loop of collaboration and confirmation. You *imagined* the world as real, and when it answered back, it proved itself.

Forty years on, the games of Infocom have faded into obscurity, and the Inform games made by me and others have also largely disappeared (though the Inform community itself lives on, broadened to encompass Twine and choice-based games, and my contemporaries from that time include well-known developers, and even a former **Edge** columnist). But, for me at least, the rhythm of that early interaction loop remains bright. The notion that a game could be a *partnership* between player and writer: an enthusiastic conversation, as thrilling and unpredictable as a really great first date, with each participant lifting the other up and pushing the collective story forward. The question that powers my writing and designing is largely this: how do we design modern games to keep that dialogue going? (Shut your mouth, GPT, you're dribbling again.)

Great conversations that advance the plot are a writer's nine-to-five, but every writer needs a space to fill. So here I am, writing for games, designing the writing for games, and now writing about designing the writing for games. I hope you'll enjoy reading.

Author and narrative designer Jon Ingold is the co-founder of Inkle Studios, whose *A Highland Song* is available now.

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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

32 Once Human
Android, iOS, PC

**36 Lost Records:
Bloom & Rage**
PC, PS5, Xbox Series

40 Nirvana Noir
PC, Xbox Series

44 Thrasher
PCVR, Quest, consoles TBA

46 Chasing The Unseen
PC

48 Darkweb Streamer
PC

50 OD
PC, Xbox Series

50 Big Walk
PC

50 Tenebris Somnia
PC

50 Horses
PC

50 World Of Goo 2
PC, consoles TBA



Explore the iPad
edition of Edge for
extra Hype content

Giving the game away

Often, a player's relationship with a game begins before they actually get their hands on it. In some cases, it can start several years before: publishers can use long hype cycles to nurture fanbases, subsections of which are eager to fervently defend those games against any perceived slight. Early Access periods and crowdfunding campaigns, meanwhile, encourage communities to build around games, giving players a vested interest in – and in some cases direct input toward – their subsequent development.

But there's no neat, one-size-fits-all approach for how best to announce a game, nor how to talk about it thereafter. Granted, two of the titles here adopted a similar tactic, both introduced via short trailers at The Game Awards. Don't Nod Montreal isn't yet prepared to reveal too much about *Lost Records: Bloom & Rage*, but we're able to truffle out some key details during a Zoom chat with the core creative team. The same goes for *Thrasher*, the latest from *Thumper* artist and composer Brian Gibson, in collaboration with former Harmonix alum Mike Mandel. Both seem anxious about their one-minute teaser. "Do we want to show a lot of gameplay or

do we just want to get people hyped?" Mandel frowns. "It's hard to convey mood and scale in a trailer," Gibson adds. But, again over Zoom, we find out enough to whet the appetite for this psychedelic VR odyssey.

Speaking of psychedelia, Feral Cat Den is again involving its community in *Nirvana Noir*, its surprise sequel to 2021's *Genesis Noir*. Creative lead Evan Anthony hopes the game's storytelling will be "enriched by inviting in a panoply of voices", though it sounds like we won't see the results of that until well into 2025. There's something to be said, then, for the approach taken by Starry Studio for *Once Human*: arriving seemingly out of nowhere, this sandbox survival game is both weird and good enough to have already won over a sizeable audience via word of mouth alone.

MOST WANTED

Grand Theft Auto VI

PC, consoles TBA

The initial buzz may have died down by now (how could such levels possibly have been maintained?), but there is still plenty of activity within certain corners to keep conversations going, not least the work of hardened enthusiasts attempting to map the game ahead of its release, in both flat 2D and 3D-modelled form.

1000x Resist

PC

When *80 Days/Thirsty Suitors* scribe Meghna Jayanth waxes lyrical about a game, it's worth taking notice. Alas, the preview build we're sent crashes several times before we've had a chance to fully explore what promises to be a stylishly violent slice of sci-fi drama.

Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

It's been the better part of a year since we explored The Lands Between. Right now, we'll take any excuse for a return visit.

H | Y
P | E

ONCE HUMAN

Surviving the
new weird

Developer	Starry Studio
Publisher	NetEase
Format	Android, iOS, PC
Origin	China
Release	Q3

For a world sent into anarchy by extraterrestrial particles capable of mutating people into cosmic monsters, the highways of this post-apocalypse aren't half busy with tourists. Stepping into its introductory area, we see temporary camps and half-constructed player houses in every direction we look — in fact, we struggle to find a suitable patch of empty wilderness to mark out a territory of our own. A few hills over, and after a close encounter with a prehistoric-sized crocodile, we stumble into an empty plot of land with a bounty of banana trees and exposed copper deposits. We call it home, but aren't surprised when we return a couple of hours later to find a handful of neighbours have moved in. Say what you will about canned beans and antibiotics, property value will be as high as ever when the end times come.

Then again, even developer Starry Studio didn't anticipate the interest its multiplayer survival game would draw. Shortly after launching, the open beta was switched to an invitation-only system to stall the flood of incoming players, while the maximum number of testers was more than doubled to 50,000. Even then, would-be survivalists were still being turned away on the game's bulging Discord server. Not bad for a new studio with no credits to its name. And while the deep pockets of Chinese parent mega-publisher

NetEase might have something to do with that, we don't doubt that the sheer scope of *Once Human* has given it a large net with which to reel in curious players.

To call this a survival game is an understatement. Yes, there are the systems you'd expect of that genre: thirst and hunger gauges need to be topped up by eating and drinking, and increasingly gourmet food can be scavenged and cooked as you unlock your way up a skill tree. On the crafting side, loose materials can be picked up and turned into more advanced components at workbenches to create weapons and tools, and rarer ores can be mined to produce more effective versions. Base-building is introduced early, too, and lets you put down walls, floors and ceilings to quickly construct neatly square buildings.

All of this is straightforward and doesn't differ vastly from anything we've seen before. But it does move quickly. We're surprised at how soon after stepping into the world we've crafted a handgun and put together a rough shack. There's a sense that these typical early-game rituals aren't all that important, as you're hurried through them to get to the survival horror, base defence and narrative scaffolding on which everything hangs.

Styled as a 'new weird' tale, the game is certainly quick to sell the strange. Creatures ►



The island setting of Nalcott offers greenery, deserts, snowy mountains, and urban environments. What you find in these places, however, makes *Once Human* stand apart from its contemporaries





ONCE
HUMAN



scattered across the open map range from menacingly tall bipedal husks to giant exploding mosquitoes and man-size synthetic moths whose wings are made of tarpaulins stamped with biohazard symbols. Even zombies come in unusual varieties: heads are replaced with toothed briefcases, tongues lolling out the front, while others have petrifying spotlights fused to their shoulders.

How it all fits together narratively is still something of a mystery after hours of play. A linear tutorial throws exposition at you faster than you can digest, as mentions of Rift Space, Rosetta Corporation, Silver Gates, Stardust, Origin Entities and myriad other proper nouns blur together. The crux, though, is that you are a Mayfly – a wandering supernatural hired hand, whose speciality is destroying Deviants (mutants, essentially) that stalk the Earth and terrorise the humans huddled inside makeshift settlements. It gives you ample motivation to

Even zombies come in unusual varieties: heads are replaced with toothed briefcases

explore the map and help the NPCs you meet, usually by recovering an item, killing a Deviant or investigating strange goings-on. In this early phase of the game, it doesn't amount to all that much. But the work the developers have put into making a truly weird world is obvious from the start, and the delightfully bizarre phenomena we encounter – roaming commuter buses that have sprouted legs; phantasmal bolts of lightning shooting from the sky – suggest one that's big on surprises.

More familiar is the moment-to-moment action, although even that is unconventional for an MMORPG. Strip away the survival systems and you'll find a basic thirdperson shooter. Enemies are adorned with glowing red weak spots, and gunfights usually involve firing off a few shots, leaping away from incoming projectiles, and bashing incoming enemies. Add a rudimentary stealth system (a crouch system, really) that you're encouraged to use to evade higher-level opponents, and it's a far cry from the more rigid combat systems that have dominated many an MMORPG.



A nifty quick-build campsite system, meanwhile, means you can instantly set up the tools to craft basic resources. The survival elements seldom stall the action, then, and the ability to transport your entire base to a new location at the press of a button leads into a steady progression loop: scavenge, craft, build and complete nearby quests, then up sticks to move to a higher-level area for more challenging combat encounters.

As of this beta, those fights don't quite match the finesse of the big-budget titles *Once Human* aims to emulate. Enemy animations in particular look off, and the stilted movement of the player character – largely imperceptible, but more noticeable in the hands – reminds us how easy it is to take refined traversal for granted. We get a similar pang of concern from the branching dialogue and collectible letters scattered about. While some have yet to be translated from their original Mandarin, what we do read often comes across as oddly florid or jarring. "If I came here to attack you, you'd be dead already", our character says to a friendly NPC, without our prompting. As we stand there practically naked, starving, armed with only an empty pistol, we suspect it would have been better to say nothing at all.

It's not hard to see where Starry Studios has most heavily invested its resources. The first boss we square off against is a chain-gun-wielding, rocket-firing swamp monster that forces us to learn its attack patterns and make full use of our arsenal. We then hit an obstacle of our own making when we run out of bullets. With no means of crafting any more without exiting the fight and losing our progress, we resort to setting about the remains of its health bar with a wrench – and consume most of our health packs in the process. It's the sort of memorable set-piece that is par for the course in big action games, but feels novel in this context. *Once Human* is set to be released on PC, iOS and Android, and while surely only the beefiest mobile hardware will have the capacity to run it, the idea of taking an MMORPG of this style and size on the go is still a largely unrealised one. Given the growing global popularity of mobile gaming, we shouldn't expect the post-apocalypse to get any less busy. ■



Party time

Competitive and cooperative multiplayer is a firm focus. Guilds – here named Hives – can build shared bases and compete to occupy resource areas for rare materials. Individual players, meanwhile, can enter into a Chaos state to attack others and loot their territories at the risk of retaliation. Yet at times you could almost mistake *Once Human* for an open-world singleplayer shooter. The world map is dotted with outposts to uncover and quest markers to investigate. And when we're sent trekking miles across the map, we're occasionally distracted by a factory or settlement with its own set of quick-hit tasks. It feels like Starry Studio is trying to appeal to every type of player: the survivalist and the shooter; the action hero and the story lover; the lone wolf and the team player.



TOP Boss fights go big, and in the alpha range from carnivorous tree monsters to bipedal electricity pylons mutated into life by Starfall. ABOVE With orange juice, honeysuckle tea, malt ale, roasted pumpkin and steaks on offer, even gourmands won't go hungry



TOP In traditional survival game fashion, you enter the world naked and afraid, although soon have a gun thrust into your hand. ABOVE We get a hint of Remedy's *Control* from the surreal Rift Space – an otherworldly area that acts as a backdrop to dungeons. LEFT This settlement is a safe refuge from the wilderness, although the people inside quickly send you outside to investigate anomalies

H | Y
P | E

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE

Life is strange, but the
past is stranger

Developer/publisher	Don't Nod
Format	PC, PS5, Xbox Series
Origin	Canada
Release	TBA 2024


Watching the reveal trailer for the debut release from Don't Nod's new Montréal studio, if you didn't already know it came from several members of the core team behind the original *Life Is Strange*, you could take an educated guess. From its teenage leads to its colour palette (no one loves golden hour quite *this* much), its use of music and magic-realist style — with themes of time, memory, self-discovery and secrets in the mix — the game's creative lineage is more than evident. But, as the action fast-forwards 27 years to the present day, it's clear the team behind it has greater ambitions this time.

That's apparent when producer **Luc Baghdadoust** and creative director **Michel Koch** talk of their desire not just to create a new game, but a new *universe*. When the two were involved with the creation of *Life Is Strange*, it was always considered to be a one and done. "We had absolutely no idea of where we could go — *if* we could go elsewhere," Koch says. "It was just the story of Max and Chloe." After it became a huge success, he adds, the team had the opportunity to work with Square Enix on sequel *Life Is Strange 2* (not to mention the charming interstitial spinoff, *The Awesome Adventures Of Captain Spirit*). But these were never creatively conceived as a continuation. "What is most exciting creatively with *Lost Records*," Koch says, "is

that we can think of where we would love to go for other games, other stories."

To achieve that goal, the pair understood it was time to step away from the series with which they'd made their name. They may have helped establish *Life Is Strange*, but they didn't own the property; Square Enix did. "We wanted to create characters where we could really oversee their future," Koch says. That meant a physical move, too. Discussions about expanding the studio beyond its Parisian headquarters had been ongoing for some time, we're told, while Koch adds that, when working on *Life Is Strange 2*, he began to feel that the studio had grown too large: "I was working as game director but I didn't know absolutely everybody on the team." As such, he warmed to the idea of "an opportunity to start from scratch, recreating the team on a more human scale." A move to North America made perfect sense, he says, not just allowing Don't Nod to draw from a fresh talent pool, particularly for writers and narrative and game designers, but "to be closer to our audience, and to where the game takes place. There were a lot of things that felt right with this move."

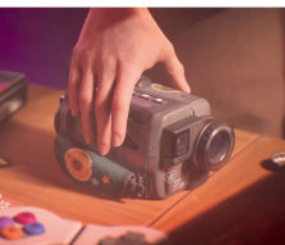
The creative seed for *Bloom & Rage* was first planted several years ago, back when Baghdadoust and Koch were finishing their work on *Life Is Strange 2* and had started ►



"When we work on a story with our writer, Jean-Luc [Cano], we mostly try to think of the characters first," Michel Koch says. "If you don't have strong characters, even with the best plot, you create way less of a connection"



LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE



discussing next steps with writer Jean-Luc Cano. “The very starting point was this idea of meeting characters at two different times in their lives – a reunion of characters [in the present day] as grown-up adults, women in their 40s,” Koch begins. “And remembering and going back in the past to try to replay and recreate what happened what they did 27 years ago, when they were teenagers.” The nature of that *what* is naturally one of the game’s mysteries – and Don’t Nod is keen to keep its powder dry about a number of other details at this stage. But we’re able to tease out a few of those secrets, and get a clearer picture of the kind of game – and perhaps series – *Lost Records* is going to be.

That early idea has steadily germinated in the intervening years, allowing members of the team to tap into their collective experience as creators and as human beings. As Koch points out, all the games they have worked on so far

“It’s the last moment before the rise of mobile phones, the rise of social media”

have featured child or adolescent protagonists. “In a way, we are continuing to do that in *Bloom & Rage* with the story of these four teenage girls, but with those two timelines, we have really the opportunity to talk about who they are as adults today.” As 40somethings who experienced growing up in the ’90s, it’s a chance, too, to tap into their own memories of the time; Koch says that from a creative standpoint it’s like “being able to talk to the characters we have created and worked with in all of our previous games.”

Beyond their personal connection to the era, Baghadoust adds that the earlier timeline will allow them to explore the period before the Internet changed the way we communicate. “Human interactions were made in a different way,” he says. “And there was a lot of innocence [about] the kind of problems that we are facing in the world right now.” That, it’s clear, will factor into the narrative and the contrasting group dynamics and character relationships. “It’s the last moment before the rise of mobile phones, the rise of social media,”

Koch adds. “You will have to discover that when we show more of the game, but it’s a very strong storytelling device to showcase how different it is to be part of a group of friends in the mid-’90s versus today, where everything is linked to your online image.”

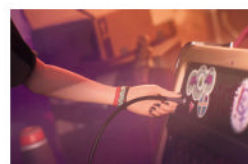
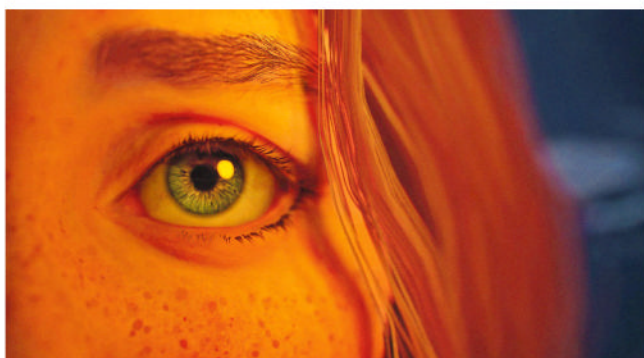
That’s an intriguing thought from the makers of a series built around interactive dialogue, and Koch hints that *Bloom & Rage*’s conversations will be more organic and dynamic than those in *Life Is Strange*. It helps that this is an ensemble piece, though you’ll only be playing as one of the four girls (there’s a discussion before this is confirmed – “I *think* we can say,” Baghadoust laughs). Koch says that while he enjoys games in which you play as multiple characters, he feels a disconnect when the perspective shifts: “I play a character in one scene, but then in the next scene I see this character talking to me, and I’m not choosing the words?” Rather, he says, it’s about ensuring you have a strong presence within the group, albeit without being the sole driver of the conversation. “You might want to more clearly listen to someone or someone else, and try to intervene or interrupt someone while they are talking.” We’re sensing hints of *Oxenfree*’s naturalistic exchanges, which would be a welcome development.

Throughout our conversation, there’s a sense that they’re itching to tell us more; three times Koch prefaces a new detail by saying “I cannot say too much about it, but...” Suffice it to say that you “will see interesting things for interactivity on how you can have an impact and agency within these two timelines”. Tellingly, he corrects himself when discussing the differences between the group across both time periods (“in the present timeline, when you meet those characters – some of those characters – again”), which suggests their reunion won’t be a happy one. The excitement to “tell a new story with new characters”, then, is tangible, as is the desire to make this the first step into a broader universe – albeit one that will be fully self-contained (“no cliffhangers!” Koch promises). After all, they recognise that the opportunity for a potential new series to bloom will depend on the response. “We know where we want to go,” Koch says. “If we can continue the story.” ■



Shining star

In centring a story on four female friends connected by a dark incident in their past, we’re naturally reminded of Showtime’s *Yellowjackets*, though Koch says the main pop-culture touchstone is Stephen King’s *It*. “The 27-year gap we have in *Bloom & Rage* is not a coincidence,” he says. King’s *Stand By Me* and perhaps its closest contemporary antecedent, *Stranger Things*, were also inspirations for the game’s ensemble storytelling. As for the ’90s influence, Koch says that he grew up with a lot of North American pop culture at the time. “The *X-Files*, *Twin Peaks* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* helped us grow as artists, and there is definitely a kind of homage to this timeline – wanting to give back to the ’90s like what they gave to us.”



TOP What's been shown so far suggests another step forward in production values for *Don't Nod*. We're certainly a long way from the original *Life Is Strange*'s endearingly wonky lip-syncing and animations. **MAIN** From the start, Koch says, the team wanted "to have this feeling of reuniting with friends, plural." Hence four main characters rather than the duos of *Life Is Strange* and its sequel. "We wanted to talk about what it is to meet friends from your past. How do you reconnect with these people?"



TOP *Don't Nod* is keen not to take too rose-tinted a view of the past; Baghadoust hints that the game will touch upon societal attitudes towards women in the '90s. **ABOVE** Music plays an important role in the girls' lives, Koch says. In the real world, grunge might have been gasping its last by 1995, but this foursome seem to be keeping its spirit alive. **LEFT** Koch: "We like to have a strong [core] of dialogue and environmental storytelling, but we also try to find some new formulas so we're not just repeating ourselves and copy-pasting each time"



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NIRVANA NOIR

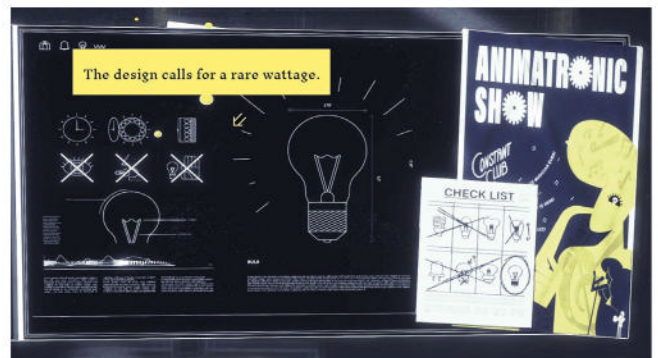
All in all is all we are

Developer	Feral Cat Den
Publisher	Fellow Traveller
Format	PC, Xbox Series
Origin	US
Release	2025

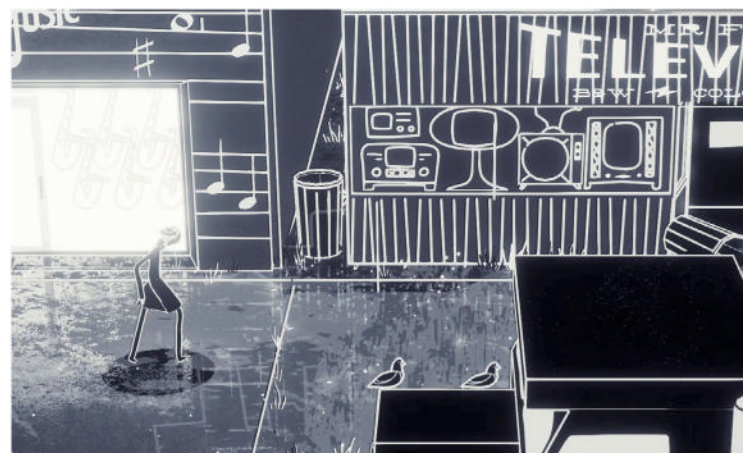


The characteristics of the two different versions of No Man are reflected in the type of interactions you'll face in each timeline. "One of them is more passive, trying to pick up the pieces after something has happened," producer Evan Stark says, "while the other No Man is a more active, making-things-happen kind of guy."

EDGE



ABOVE The soundtrack in Constant Testament is very different to the familiar jazz of Black Rapture. Indeed, the way the score fluctuates in both timelines has changed. Abel: "It's not evolving as you move through a linear space — it's responding more based on conversations or paths of interaction. It's a lot more driven by the plot than the environment, I think." TOP RIGHT Anthony says Andy Warhol has been "a huge inspiration" for the game's art, which also folds in influences from comic artists such as Paul Kirchner (Dope Rider) and Wes Wilson's psychedelic poster designs. MAIN "So many of our interactions look like cutscenes but they're actually not," Abel says. "We've done things like enlarging the cursor to make it more obvious, so it's like: this is clearly gameplay." BELOW LEFT "It's gonna be at least twice as long [as *Genesis Noir*]," Stark says, "without overstaying its welcome." The extra text is one key factor in that longer runtime, Anthony says. BELOW RIGHT Those who enjoyed the first game's Improvisation chapter will be pleased to learn that *Nirvana Noir* will have more interactive musical elements. Stark: "The toy-like aspect is still a really good North Star for us with our interactions"





NIRVANA NOIR



Producer Evan Stark and
studio co-founder and
technical lead Jeremy Abel

Just as its story transcended space and time, Feral Cat Den's 2021 debut, *Genesis Noir*, eluded easy categorisation. Such was the fluidity with which it shifted between genres, in fact, that **Evan Stark**, who wrote for and edited the game, has made an interactive joke about it on his website. Was it a 'cosmic noir thriller', as he initially posits? An 'interactive fiction adventure' (the definition he settles on)? Perhaps, as several lines of strickenthrough text in between suggest, it doesn't matter, so long as "you're having fun playing the thing and getting a good story from it". That, surely, is hard to argue with.

In any case, a sequel didn't seem especially likely. *Genesis Noir* does, after all, end with the whole universe "splitting", as technical lead **Jeremy Abel** puts it, or "exploding", per creative lead **Evan Anthony**. Yet the ramifications of that final choice – as watch-peddling protagonist No Man arrives at the apartment of jazz singer Miss Mass and the player either hands her a flower and steps inside or tosses it and departs – were perhaps not quite as final as they seemed. "Since No Man experiences all time simultaneously," Anthony begins, "in my mind, that meant that both of those endings were canon. He is experiencing both walking away from the affair and going through with it and experiencing the events of the first game. Having a story where a character is caught between two very different life paths seemed like an interesting concept to explore."

A follow-up, then, gives Feral Cat Den the opportunity to have its cosmic cake and eat it. And, for that matter, to more fully explore the city you only see at the start of its predecessor. Visually, there's an obvious split between the two timelines: *Black Rapture* adopts the same monochromatic palette as most of the first game, while *Constant Testament* is more in keeping with the vibrant, psychedelic imagery of its final act. You pick one timeline at the start of *Nirvana Noir*, after which the story alternates between the two. "It's very structured," Anthony says.

That might pique the interest of those who found the original game a little too picaresque for their tastes – though there will be no less range in the kind of playful interactions that saw *Genesis Noir* pinball

between quasi-point-and-click adventure, tactile toy and musical puzzler. Instead, these bespoke elements will be more closely intertwined with *Nirvana Noir*'s deeply intricate story, rather than feeling like one-off minigames. "There's much more emphasis on a mystery and a conspiracy and a plot," Anthony explains. "As you navigate your way through this environment, you'll return to areas and see how they've changed. So it's more typically gamey in that way."

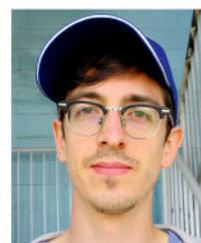
How, then, does the studio approach these interactions? Does the story primarily inform them, or does the idea come first and then the narrative is reworked to fit? "I would say art and tech lead," says Stark, now in the role of producer. "Where we have a concept, and then we try to figure out a fun way to express that. Between those [and the story], we've had a lot of different horses leading the

"Since No Man experiences all time simultaneously, both of those endings were canon"

race. And it's always interesting seeing which one takes priority." In development, he says, it's become increasingly clear that ensuring the story is flexible enough to accommodate the best ideas has been crucial. "Because we all want to do the fun stuff," Abel adds.

The upshot is two very different kinds of detective story: in one timeline you scrutinise and interact with clues, as in the first game, while in the other your investigations are more conversational in nature. There will be more text to go with that dazzling art, then, and Feral Cat Den has taken the opportunity to do something different with its words, too: you'll manipulate typography and text boxes, feeding letters into a meat grinder and reassembling them to reveal dialogue trees.

Those who played *Genesis Noir* may have an idea of what to expect, but this should still have the same unpredictable tempo and off-the-cuff quality. Tight in its construction but with room for thrilling improvisation? Perhaps Stark can add 'playable psychedelic jazz odyssey' to the list this time. ■



No Man's score

London-based audio collective Skillbard is once again responsible for the game's soundtrack. "It felt like a no-brainer to keep working with them," Anthony (above) says. "We really love collaborating with them and we're super grateful that they wanted to do a [second] game, because they worked so hard on the first that I didn't expect them to say yes to another." This time, the musical inspirations lean towards the lysergic, at least on one timeline: late-'60s electronic rock duo Silver Apples, Anthony says, are one key influence, as are the LSD-fuelled experimental multimedia collages of One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest author Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters: "We're trying to work with them and make some interactions that can play with that era of sound making."



Developer Puddle
Publisher Creature
Format PCVR,
Quest, consoles TBA
Origin US
Release 2024



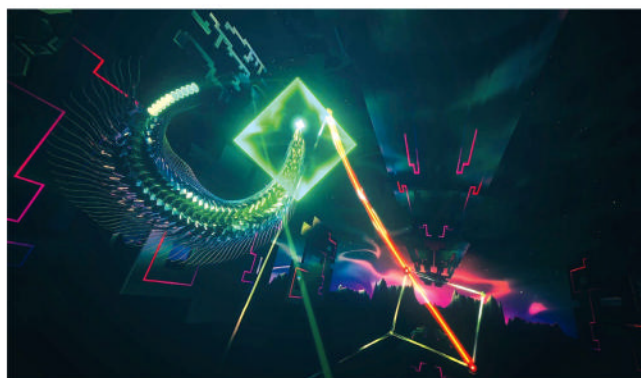
THRASHER

This serpentine successor is a slippery beast indeed

Seldom has a game been summarised as concisely as 2016's *Thumper*, its two-word logline – 'rhythm violence' – setting out its oppressive agenda. As an iridescent beetle zips down winding tracks suspended in a void, every corner represents a threat, a single mistimed input enough to shatter your fragile carapace, leaving you one more hit from death. Despite some aesthetic similarities, the teaser for artist/composer **Brian Gibson's** successor makes it clear that a similar name needn't mean a similar game. Even so, the two-word phrase that stands out when we ask about *Thrasher's* origins is one we'd never have guessed.

"We had this selfie stick," co-designer **Mike Mandel** begins, explaining that it emerged from a prototype he and Gibson had developed shortly after Mandel departed Harmonix (they were colleagues until Gibson left to make *Thumper*). Gibson was looking to do something new, and Mandel convinced him to try VR. "We had this shared sensibility of wanting to start from something that just feels good," he says. Moving said stick in a figure-eight pattern led to the idea of using gestural controls to steer a dragon or serpent, which then prompted thoughts of a fresh take on a mobile classic. "*Snake* is inherently about getting bigger, right? And in VR you have that visceral experience of scale. So we put a ribbon and a weird face on the end of the stick, swung it around and realised, OK, there's something here."

Thumper was a response, Gibson says, to "buzzwords like synaesthesia, and games being about having good, blissful feelings. I was like, no, actually, videogames are this confrontational, aggressive thing; they kind of bring out your demons when you play them." Early development of *Thrasher* was in turn a



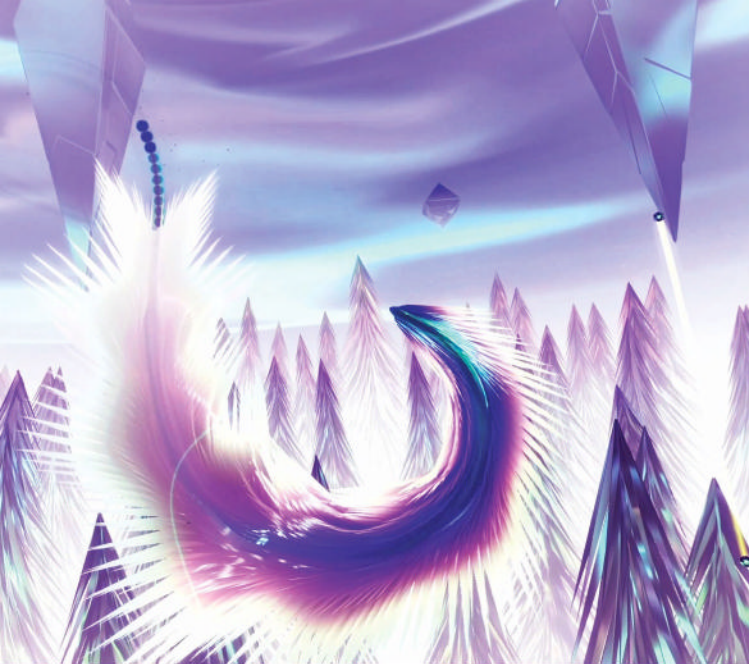
reaction to *Thumper*, beginning as a more lighthearted game – "almost casual", Gibson adds – with cartoonish, voxel characters. "It was a *completely* different vibe. I thought it would be cool to thwart expectations of what I might do next." But as the idea took shape, Gibson was "seduced" back to the darker side of his previous game, particularly its look – "that sleek, stylish minimalist aesthetic that makes you feel uncomfortable."

As the idea took shape, Gibson was "seduced" back to the darker side of Thumper

That journey is reflected in some way in *Thrasher's* levels – each of which has a clearly defined arc, despite being shorter than *Thumper's* courses. Hatching from an egg, you're born as a tiny wormlike creature that grows as it consumes, steadily bulking up over a succession of short waves as you prepare to face a deadly boss. "Every ten or 20 seconds, the music is pumping up, your creature is evolving, it sheds its skin and gets more

Turning *Thrasher* into a race against time was key, Mandel says: "We watched some players and they were really slow and not having as much fun. When we [introduced] the time pressure, they started having the experience we really wanted them to have." He's keen to add that the studio's goal is to eventually bring the game to all platforms





LEFT "Levels are sort of like a puzzle," Mandel says. "There are many ways to approach each wave, and it's like, can you figure out the trick, the set of combos that gets you through it even faster?"



For a while, Mandel says, *Thrasher's* soundtrack was exclusively percussive, with rhythms inspired by Chinese dragon ceremonies. Now, Gibson tells us, it's "swirling and melodic – there's this undulating musicality to it that really represents what this [creature] is"

elaborate and cool-looking and bigger and the intensity ratchets up," Gibson explains. That's reflected by his shifting soundtrack, which starts with more hopeful ("sometimes even euphoric") tones with looping arpeggios evoking your circular movements, before the beat thumps louder and, as Mandel has it, "the dread comes in" ahead of a climactic fight. Then you head into the light and are reborn in a new form, and the cycle restarts.

It's not like any version of *Snake* we've seen before, not least since the emphasis is on speed: your threats are not walls or your own lengthening torso, but a depleting timer. "It feels good to swoop around; we're trying not

to demand Operation-level precision," Mandel says. "We wanted the gameplay to encourage this sweeping recklessness and be forgiving about the details," Gibson adds. Even so, skilful manoeuvres will be rewarded, with tricks, chains and combos recouping some time and boosting your score.

Leaderboard chasing aside, it's very different from *Thumper*: playful and elusive, less punishing, with an audio palette to match its broader range of moods. Somewhere, in other words, between 'rhythm violence' and 'selfie stick', and certainly not as well-suited to a neat two-word summary. Which only makes it all the more fascinating. ■

Virtual reptilia

Where *Thumper* was designed for consoles but worked wonderfully in VR, Mandel says that, by happy accident, the reverse is true for *Thrasher* – "even though all our decisions go through that lens of: *does this feel good in VR?*" He hopes it can fill what he sees as a gap in this particular space, for games that can be played for extended periods without having to stand up. "There's this trend for room-scale [experiences] and wanting to walk around and be extremely physical. I love those games, but sometimes I want to plop down on the couch and just vibe out and chill."

Thrasher might get more intense as it goes on, but since its gestural controls "don't require you to be big", as Mandel puts it, you could play it lying down.



CHASING THE UNSEEN

Standing on the shoulders (and various other parts) of giants

Matthieu Fiorilli spent over a decade working on visual effects for companies such as Industrial Light & Magic and Rodeo FX. Most recently he was creature technical director at Weta Digital, on films such as *Avatar: The Way Of Water* and *Suicide Squad*. In 2021, he decided to try his hand at game development. His first title is a creature feature of sorts, although one that shuns Hollywood violence in favour of a more cerebral approach.

"*Shadow Of The Colossus* left a big impression on me when I was young," Fiorilli explains. Like Fumito Ueda's classic, *Chasing The Unseen* introduces us to leviathans that inspire a sense of awe as they loom into view. It's also possible to climb these colossal creatures, although here you cannot kill them. Instead, the focus is on exploration.

Another inspiration was *Journey*, a game Fiorilli admired for its way of "speaking without words". *Chasing The Unseen* is similarly reticent to explain too much. Rather, it places you in the shoes of a young boy who is lost in surreal, dreamlike worlds without

"Fractals produce these organic shapes that would be really hard to create otherwise"

further elaboration — you're aware he's seeking something, but exactly what that is remains unclear. Fiorilli says he has drawn on Buddhism for some of the game's ideas.

During our early moments with *Chasing The Unseen*, another influence becomes apparent: *Breath Of The Wild*. Holding the left trigger unfurls a cloth glider not unlike Link's, although here it has a separate stamina meter that's much smaller than the one for climbing. There's also a limit to what you *can* climb: cliffs are not scalable, but trees and giant monsters are. Reaching the glowing light source that marks your goal requires

scrambling up the writhing limbs of a giant, floating octopus, then leaping off at the right moment to reach a higher platform.

"I find them captivating," says Fiorilli of his decision to include the colossal cephalopod. "The way they move their limbs around makes them so cool to look at." Indeed, the octopus is hypnotising to watch as it glides lazily over your head, its tentacles constantly twisting and curling. Other behemoths, such as a giant snake and a jellyfish-inspired creature, await in the full game.

The strangely undulating and fragmented worlds, meanwhile, have been generated using fractals, something else Fiorilli finds captivating. He takes a fractal, fiddles around with the parameters until he finds a shape he likes, then grabs a section and moulds it into a level. "Fractals produce these organic shapes that would be really hard to create otherwise," he says. "And since at the core they come from somewhat simple math, it's a bit like looking at nature in a certain way."

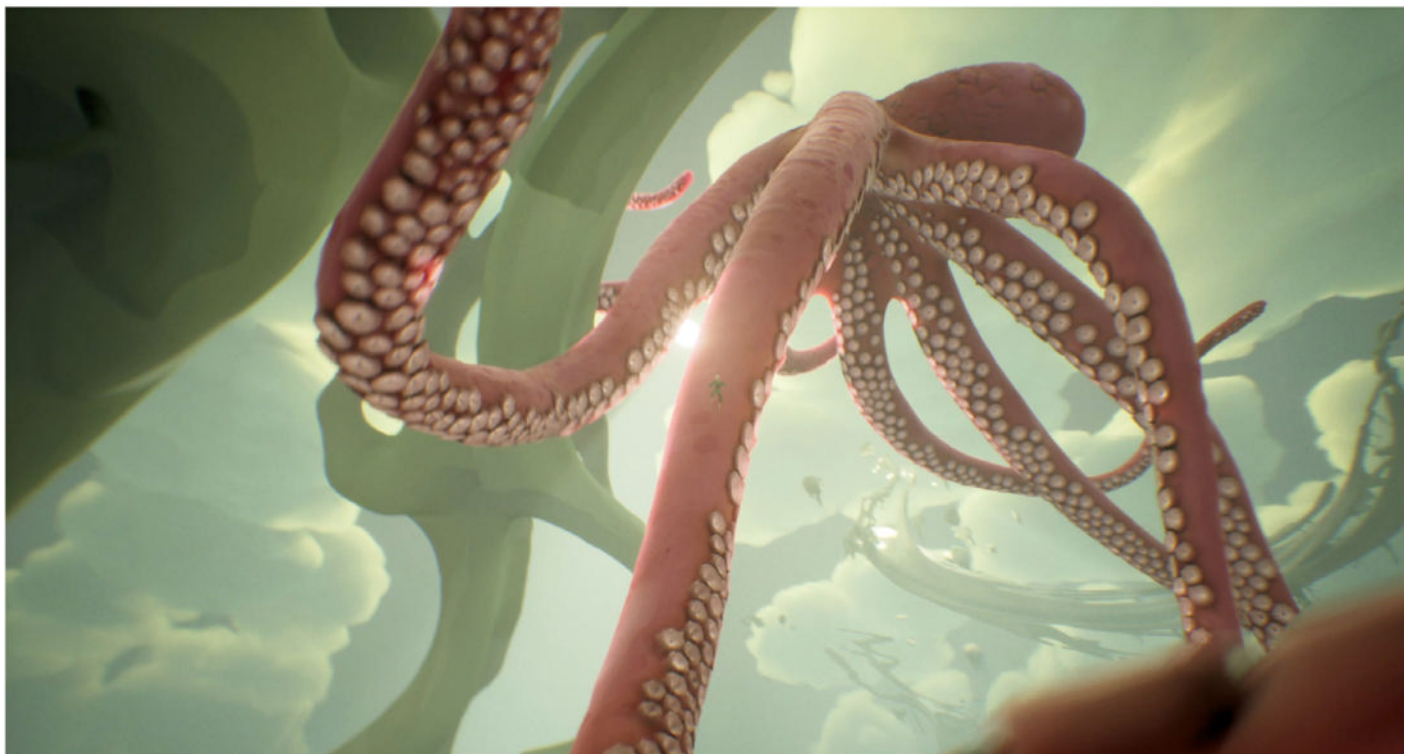
The main impression we take away from the demo is one of intense loneliness. Like *Shadow Of The Colossus*, the vast levels are mostly empty, and sprinting for long stretches through this surreal landscape feels akin to being trapped in a dream. The solitude serves to intensify your first encounter with a giant creature, the welcome discovery of a fellow living being in this alien world. The fact that they aid you in your escape only increases your gratitude for their presence. Less is definitely more here — *Chasing The Unseen* could hardly be farther from the Hollywood bombast Fiorilli has left behind.

The boy also has an appearance of fragility that inspires protective instincts. Falling a little too far will see him perish and prompt a restart from the last save point, while landing on a slope will see him lose his footing and tumble over and over, a wild descent ending with him curled in the foetal position. There he will stay, until you prompt him to get up with a press of a button. At times, then, the dream feels a little closer to a nightmare. ■



Skill check

"I found the idea of having the total freedom to realise your own vision quite attractive," Fiorilli says of his decision to trade a career in movie visual effects for solo game development. "I saw what other solo developers were able to do by themselves and I was impressed and inspired. We live in a time where we have access to incredible tech and can do so much alone." Fiorilli says his skills with the 3D animation software Houdini have translated well from the world of film. But he has had to learn how to use Unreal Engine, adding that "it's quite hard to wear all the hats you need to wear when going solo. You need to pick up a lot of skills along the way."



TOP This giant floating octopus helps you reach a high platform in the demo. The boy is just visible in the centre, clambering up a limb. ABOVE The fractal-based levels and saturated colours have a dreamlike quality. FAR LEFT In addition to scrambling up colossal creatures, the boy can climb trees – or tree-like things. LEFT This enormous snake was the first leviathan Fiorilli brought to life

Developer/
publisher
We Have Always
Lived In The Forest
Format PC
Origin Australia
Release TBA



DARKWEB STREAMER

Creating a fame monster

Stalkers, viruses, ghosting: you're never more than a few clicks away from stumbling into a horror trope online. Yet *Darkweb Streamer*, a narrative Roguelike situated within a browser's own digital shadow, began with a desire to create a "beautiful" Internet. Having spent her childhood as "one of the avant-garde designers" of MySpace and GeoCities pages, director **Chantal Ryan** is familiar with building off-kilter digital spaces. For this project, the challenge became one of creative reanimation. "I didn't want to make a game about the Internet of today; it's a horrible, empty space," Ryan tells us. "If I want to make an Internet, it's going to be that place

charged with magic, potential, possibility, authenticity and individuality."

Channelling the spirit of a nascent Internet, then, meant fusing the digital with the supernatural. And foregrounding those otherworldly elements allowed Ryan to literalise the psychological anxieties of streaming, via demonic entities that are capable of turning streamers into "strange, monstrous shells of themselves".

Before that, though, players must establish themselves on the streaming circuit as a 'skreener'. Each broadcast is an unboxing of sorts, involving a cursed object, with skill checks determining the effect on your health

Ritual ingredients play a critical role in reaching *Darkweb Streamer's* endgame. Witch doctors typically offer useful supplies (of dubious origin)



Ryan refers to GeoCities' penchant for digital paganism as a major influence, with procedural generation conjuring distinctly odd superstitions





Hauntings aren't necessarily bound to the desktop; ascending the ranks of skreeners can result in unexpected (and violent) visitations offscreen too

and sanity. Successful streams bring perks, subscribers and 'skash' — currency for buying items or ritual ingredients. But notoriety has a cost; rising fame tempts nightmares. "The higher you get up the echelons of the fame experience," Ryan says, "the more vulnerable you are to the dark forces of life."

Our first attempts don't exactly set the chat alight; after tossing and catching a

"Streaming is a very numbers-driven thing, so it's actually a really great thing to simulate"

haunted doll, a failed second attempt leaves our character camera-shy. Our profile is marked with an 'embarrassed' hashtag, denting our performance stat and leading us closer to a literal blue screen of death. Indeed, the lucrative highs and humiliating lows of streaming aren't distant from a Roguelike loop. "Streaming is a very numbers-driven thing," Ryan says, "so it's actually a really great thing to simulate."

Less straightforward are the systems underpinning those simulations. Much of *Darkweb Streamer* is grounded in procedural generation — a risky gambit for a narrative

experience, but one Ryan is confident best serves her character-first ambitions. "Our language is always procedurally generated," she explains. "The hardest part of writing a story for me is picking one of a hundred directions or words that I could choose." Developing a flexible system accounting for verbal tics, aspirations and motivations would be more daunting were it not for Ryan's background in anthropology. Such is the priority placed on creating believable users that characters are internally referred to as NPPs — Non-Player Persons. "It's semiotics," Ryan explains. "We want to shift away from this idea of the two-dimensional NPC to respecting these people as the digital beings we intend them to be." ("The Internet is people," she says later.) Significant elements of these systems are absent from our build but the peculiar poetry and personae we encounter already evoke the unpredictability of the web's early days.

Plans for community-driven contributions may help remedy any discrepancies. Twitch integration promises custom events, with viewers roleplaying as NPPs. Ryan's dedication to communal storytelling is already evident in an elaborate ARG, featuring hidden TikTok accounts and messages buried in static. Harkening back to her research on creepypasta and experience writing tabletop roleplaying games, this shared narrative is designed to persist long after release.

Amid all these ideas, it's the chilling way streaming can divorce individuals from their communities — and how *Darkweb Streamer* reflects that back at us — that cuts the deepest. The most unsettling thing we encounter is not a flesh-eating worm, but a character-creation prompt: "Tell the world who you are." We're not sure we want *this* world to know. ■



Idol chit-chat

Signing guestbooks scattered across the Web eventually leads to new contacts on the Chitter app, an instant messaging portal à la *Videoverse*. The emphasis on procedural language means subject matter can be unpredictable, with initial player prompts limited to either 'Chat' or 'Say Goodbye'. Failure to maintain a lively dialogue invokes a warning that our conversation is becoming stilted — a judgemental jump scare in its own right — though small talk mercifully only accounts for a fraction of interactions in the final release. Forging bonds translates into loyal viewership, even encouraging your following to supply items or services for later broadcasts — a sly nod towards the transactional relationships between streamers and sycophantic audiences.





ROUNDUP

OD

Developer Kojima Productions **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Format** PC, Xbox Series **Origin** Japan **Release** TBA



The only game-maker not to be ushered offstage within a minute of opening his mouth, Hideo Kojima's extended Game Awards appearance at least offered a reminder that no developer is better equipped to take advantage of Epic's remarkable Metahuman tech. The teaser for his horror collaboration with Jordan Peele saw Sophia Lillis, Hunter Schafer and Udo Kier reciting a phonetic pangram (well, accomplished actors uttering bizarre sentences was a formula that seemed to work in *Death Stranding*). Kojima's subsequent suggestion that this is set to be his most experimental game since the underrated *Boktai* is a more promising sign.

BIG WALK

Developer House House **Publisher** Panic **Format** PC **Origin** Australia **Release** 2025



After *Flock*, could hangout games be the latest trend in the indie space? This cooperative adventure from *Untitled Goose Game* dev House House sees a group of colourful characters explore a sun-kissed sandbox. There's plenty of room to lark about, but to complete the puzzles and activities you'll need to work as a team: locational audio factors into some challenges, as you work out alternative methods of communication when separated by soundproof glass.

TENEBRIS SOMNIA

Developer Andrés Borghi, Tobias Rusjan **Publisher** Saibot Studios
Format PC **Origin** Argentina **Release** TBA



Following a nightmare in which her ex is killed by terrifying creatures, a woman visits his apartment – and finds evidence that it might have been more than a bad dream. This point-and-click adventure offers an uncanny combination of evocative 8bit pixel art and unsettling live-action cinematics.

HORSES

Developer/publisher Santa Ragione
Format PC **Origin** Italy **Release** 2024



Milanese arthouse outfit Santa Ragione is consistent only in its desire to avoid catering to the lowest common denominator. It may be set on a farm, but this equine horror is the opposite of cosy: as a temporary ranch worker, you'll experience a summer's worth of decidedly *unwholesome* discoveries.

WORLD OF GOO 2

Developer 2D Boy **Publisher** Tomorrow Corporation
Format PC, consoles TBA **Origin** US **Release** TBA 2024



As important and influential as its late-'00s peers, 2D Boy's physics-based puzzler is perhaps the one breakthrough indie game from that era that doesn't get the credit it deserves. Fifteen years on, this sequel – from the team that made the original – should present an opportunity to rectify that.



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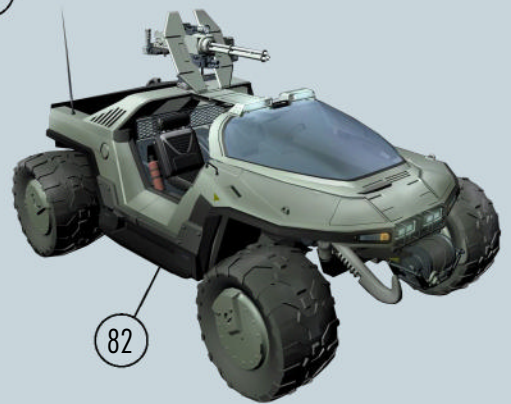
VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



76



88



82

54 **Apocalypse Now**

66 **Flying Solo**

76 **An Audience With...
Ikumi Nakamura**

82 **The Making Of...
Halo Wars**

88 **Studio Profile:
Fool's Theory**

108 **Time Extend:
Rock Band 4**



54




10

66



108



Game Exoborne
Developer Sharkmob
Publisher Level Infinite
Format PC, PS4, PS5,
Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release TBA

A P O C A L Y



A cinematic screenshot from a video game. In the foreground, a character in a dark, tactical suit with a glowing yellow light on their back stands on a cracked, asphalt road. To their left is a wrecked red car, and to their right is a blue car partially submerged in a muddy, flooded area. The background features a large, dilapidated bridge structure, a forest with vibrant red autumn foliage, and distant wind turbines under a hazy, blue sky with a few birds flying. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

P S E N O W

How Sharkmob plans to shake up the extraction shooter with the help of Mother Nature

By JON BAILES



Rebirth is a company that promises the world. A calming voiceover talks across a slick CGI ad, offering “climate surveillance solutions” for a natural environment on the brink, “Stratos towers” that control the elements, and with those “a greener, better tomorrow”. If such tech existed, it would feel like a genuine pitch, mimicking the spiel of any real-life silicon guru/entrepreneur who claims they can science their way out of global crisis, while making a big pile of digital cash. As a piece of science fiction, however, it’s more honest – a clear precursor to disaster, the show of pride before the inevitable fall.

The Rebirth ad establishes the backstory of *Exoprimal*, a multiplayer

shooter from Malmö-based Sharkmob that emerges from a worst-case scenario of trusting faceless corps bearing miracle technology. It also prefaces another presentation, this time by two of the company’s five co-founders – **Petter Mannerfelt**, *Exoprimal*’s creative director, and **Martin Hultberg**, who carries the titles of chief marketing and communications officer and IP director. Their efforts to lay out the ins and outs of the game to us are similarly polished, but mercifully

come with a lot more enthusiasm and warmth – plus time for questions.

The pair have been collaborating for years, and it shows, as does their zeal for multiplayer gaming. They both worked on *World In Conflict* for Massive Entertainment, then *The Division* after the studio shifted into Ubisoft’s hands. Leaving to set up Sharkmob in 2017, they moved into battle royale territory with *Vampire The Masquerade: Bloodhunt*. Despite their love of competitive play, though, they very much operate in ►

THE GAME EMERGES FROM A WORST-CASE SCENARIO OF TRUSTING FACELESS CORPS



MAIN One detail yet to be finalised is the maximum number of players, but the quantity will vary with the size of the map.

LEFT Typical firearms such as shotguns and sniper rifles will form the core of your loadouts, but with Rebirth's tech around, more futuristic options should be acquirable



PLAN OF FACTION

Alongside other humans, you'll encounter various NPCs, both friend and foe. Bandits are 'baseline' PvE opponents, mostly a drain on resources if you fight them, with the added risk of alerting players to your position, although they can pose a threat themselves. "I was once hunting players and flew straight into a bandit camp, and they all shot me," Mannerfelt laughs. Tougher opposition, meanwhile, comes in the form of remaining Rebirth forces, especially around the Stratos towers. As for friends, these include a "military faction [that] wants to rebuild society," Hultberg explains, and "the sovereign gang, [which believes] the Collapse is one of the best things that's happened to humanity, because now we can be free." Each will offer a bespoke mission tree, and distinct rewards.

co-op mode for our presentation, reading from a single hymn sheet, supporting each other's answers. They're also well-drilled on when to stay quiet, with numerous features still under wraps or unfinalised in the game's current pre-alpha state.

What is official is that *Exoborne* sees the duo branch into a brand of multiplayer service game they haven't focused on before – the extraction shooter. Its patterns will resemble those of genre favourites such as *Escape From Tarkov* or *Hunt: Showdown*, with missions set in open-world maps, where you risk losing your loadout if killed, and loot is only secured if you get to the chopper. Sharkmob is counting on an armful of distinguishing features, however, starting with the meaning of that 'Exo' in the title.

Player characters don armoured exoskeletons known as 'exo-rigs' that grant various powers and abilities. "We originally had another name in mind, which was simply *Rebirth*," Hultberg explains, which refers not only to the corporation but the nickname for rig wearers, the 'Reborn'. But, realising they might have faced legal wrangles over that title, they made the name about the gear itself. "There's an obvious reference to the exo-rig in there, and then of course the fact that you are borne, or carried, by the rig."

The customisable rigs should present a range of playstyle options. "We want the exo-rigs to provide you with things that synergise with your team," Mannerfelt says. His own preference, for instance, is a defensive build that allows him to play aggressively, attacking from the front while shielding teammates. Choice of weapons will, of course, be important here, but equally so will be traversal equipment and passive attachments. "You can hack into the

exo-rig," Mannerfelt explains. "You can upgrade it, fine-tune it, and add additional gadgets – a grappling hook, for example." For reasons we soon understand, movement options are at least as crucial to success as the heat you're packing.

In short, exo-rigs and the Reborn are important in the game's near-future vision of Earth due to an event ominously monikered 'the Collapse'. Rebirth was meant to be the answer to the climate crisis, we're told, but thanks to sinister conspiracies and uprising from within, the project has gone spectacularly wrong, backfiring to unleash elemental chaos around the globe. With billions dead and the climate in turmoil, the Reborn thus become the alpha survivors.

The world that Sharkmob promises us, then, is a shooter inside a mega-disaster movie such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, where the most extreme forms of climate change occur all at once. In games, where we're far more used to post-apocalyptic scenarios, it's an intriguing pitch to experience the apocalypse itself, and with that another potential killer feature: bad weather. Sharkmob is thus relying on the unreliability of Mother Nature to produce exciting emergent scenes. Extreme conditions "will ruin your plans in every session," Hultberg guarantees. "One thing we identified early was that best-laid plans are not going to work in this game. Something always forces you to react and adapt." The two marquee events implemented so far are storms and hurricanes, although the team hopes to include more. "The game is built around extreme weather and exo-rigs," Hultberg says. "So we're going to play around with it one way or another." He is confident already, though, that the weather will make sessions unique. While there are systems governing the aggressive ▶

"BEST-LAID PLANS ARE NOT GOING TO WORK. SOMETHING ALWAYS FORCES YOU TO REACT"





Rigs will be highly customisable not only functionally but cosmetically, along with the character strapped into the technology



APOCALYPSE NOW



RIGHT Some exo-rigs are built to “harness the effects of the storm,” Hultberg says, but at this stage he isn’t willing to spill the beans on specifics. BELOW Risk management comes into your choice of extraction locations, with some areas more likely to attract enemy traffic than others



weather fronts, their timing and placement will vary.

It's not merely the unpredictability of the wind and rain that should keep you on your toes either, but the tactical possibilities they bring. "Say you're in the middle of a firefight and you're about to win when the storm comes in," Hultberg explains. "All of a sudden, the guy you were dominating because you had a sniper rifle and he had a shotgun can now move up on you." Gales can equally be a means to soar above opponents while their movement on the ground is hampered, deploying the parachute installed in your rig to control your flight. "I try to hunt storms, because I find that kind of gameplay is really fun," Mannerfelt says. In other words, you aren't trying to survive the apocalypse so much as master it to get the jump on rivals. We begin to imagine midair firefights with opposing teams swirling around inside a hurricane, and although we aren't shown any corroborating footage, Mannerfelt claims such feats are definitely part of the package. "I've had many battles where there are two teams in the air at same time trying to snipe each other," he smiles.

Indeed, at the core of the combat vision for *Exoborne*, Mannerfelt and Hultberg emphasise, is a drive for verticality, which becomes one of the keywords in the presentation. "We're going to see verticality again and again and again," Mannerfelt underlines – and not only looking upwards, but downwards as you try to flank enemies from the sky using climbing gear, grapple wires, parachutes and other as-yet-unrevealed gadgets. A section of gameplay gives us a hint, as a trio of Reborn grapple up and across a great curved sky bridge that was presumably the support for some more upright Rebirth structure

not too long ago. They open fire on a rival team that look like ants from so far up, then leap off and paraglide towards them.

One thing that may suffer from this ambitious use of water, wind and height, however, is realism, a topic that arises when we ask about comparisons to the weather effects in *Just Cause 4*. "You can do different stuff if you're singleplayer or a fewplayer co-op," Hultberg says, "than in a bigger multiplayer game." Specifically, a large number of players limits the physics calculations, simply because there's so much going on. But, aware of these limitations, it seems the team has decided to lean into them. The scale of events has the potential to be extraordinary, and it's starting to become clear, Hultberg explains, what kind of mayhem can occur if, say, your crew drives a car into a tornado and all the passengers jump out. "We often end up saying, 'Should we keep it, or should we remove it?' 'It doesn't make sense, no, but it's fun, so we should keep it,'" Hultberg says. "We want to be able to create moments that are so effed up, you can only laugh." So might we see players being flung across the map? "It's been known to happen," Mannerfelt replies. At least you have a parachute.

Still, if the results are chaotic, they emerge from a very careful and measured approach to the extraction shooter, aimed at finding a wide audience while maintaining the genre's all-or-nothing stakes. As with comparable titles, Mannerfelt explains, gear is king. "You are what you carry. That means that if you want to do more damage, you need to find a bigger gun." The user-created character in each rig will remain merely human, with no levelling up of their own. Equipment, however,

will improve as you secure stuff in the wild – from weapons to rig parts, crafting materials and schematics – or as rewards for completing missions. And, as ever, anything about your person can be stolen by rivals if you die.

The balancing act here is ensuring that players can choose how much risk to take, but always with the caveat that bigger rewards entail greater danger. You may decide to go on a simple scavenging run, for instance, indulging in relatively undemanding PvE play against bandits protecting their stash. But valuable gear will be stowed in locations such as Rebirth's Stratos tower, which will be heavily guarded and attract hardened players. "At the core, this is a PvP game," Hultberg says. "But does that mean everyone shoots at everyone else all the time? No." Mannerfelt continues: "You need to make tactical decisions. 'Do I think I can win this fight or not?' Or maybe you don't have very good stuff but the [potential] benefit of attacking is worth it, even if you know the odds aren't on your side."

Mannerfelt and Hultberg are keenly aware that extraction shooters can be unwelcoming, not least because they worked on *The Division*'s conceptually similar Dark Zone mode. "It was extremely hardcore," Hultberg says. "A lot of people probably enjoyed the thought of it more than the experience." The same can be said of certain other extraction shooters. "I'm not going to mention names," Mannerfelt says. "But one almost made me cry when I lost all my weapons the first time I played." So although high stakes remain essential, he believes, Sharkmob's goal is one of "approachability". One way to find your feet, for example, is through solo play, which should make it easier to avoid major battles. "When I play alone," Mannerfelt says, "I pick a different play style where I can be more concealed." A potentially more potent sweetener, though, is that in the long term, "the punishment for dying is a little bit lower." Without ►



Petter Mannerfelt, creative director

THE LONGEST JOURNEY

Given *Exoborne*'s status as a service game – although not free to play – Sharkmob is already thinking ahead to its post-launch life. "For us, the game has two different journeys," Hultberg says. "One is done before we release the game, then another begins together with the people who play it." The main concern is to respond to the way people play the game, through stats, heat maps, event participation and so on, not only community feedback. "It sounds boring to say you have a data-driven approach," Mannerfelt says, "but data can give you a good understanding of behaviour. Sometimes you end up just listening to the best two per cent of players, and that's not really the game we want to make."

"I TRY TO HUNT STORMS, BECAUSE I FIND THAT KIND OF GAMEPLAY IS REALLY FUN"



Martin Hultberg,
chief communications
officer and IP director

PLAY TIME

A core part of Sharkmob's development philosophy that goes back to *World In Conflict*, we're told, is that the game should be "always playable", or function as early as possible, including in multiplayer. In addition, the team concentrate not only on making the game, but experiencing it for themselves. "We try to play it every day, every morning," Mannerfelt says, "to make sure it works. It's really important that we play the game all the time, because we have the ability to fix a lot of issues and bugs early on." With wistful anecdotes about past victories and calamities he drops into conversation, though, there's a healthy indication that he and his colleagues have also simply been enjoying themselves, regardless of their professional duties.

divulging specifics, he mentions that you'll unlock things on "various progression tracks" in the style of a modern Roguelike. "We don't want anyone to cry when they play this game. Quite the opposite."

Something else that might count as approachability are the studio's efforts to combine the multiplayer experience with a story to follow — or, rather, to unravel. Hultberg is at pains here to explain how much the narrative designers at Sharkmob are trying to make sure that none of the story elements intrude on live play. "We do not take control away from the player, and we never block your screen with stuff that you didn't choose to put there yourself." There are no interruptions from mission givers during tense situations, he maintains, nor periods of downtime as teammates stand idly waiting for their lead to finish watching a cutscene or mission briefing. Instead, most of the story is "unpacked" outside sorties, in a home hub where you select your loadout and talk with NPCs, including cinematics that unlock to be watched at your leisure.

During missions, meanwhile, storytelling should be of the environmental variety. "If there's a [story] character that had a famous last stand somewhere, we want the location to exist in the world," Hultberg says. "So you can see where that took place and deduce what happened." Investigating such sites with friends should help in understanding the bigger picture too. "The idea is that the community needs to do some puzzle work and make up their own mind about what's happening," Hultberg explains. "We'll provide a lot of insight and then the community will have to do the clue searching and provide the conclusions." Audio logs, recorded footage, texts, photos and more will be your jigsaw pieces, enabling groups to piece together the Rebirth mystery, if they see fit.

The option to work together beyond tactical shooting should also





MAIN Mission types include personal missions that can be completed alone, team missions, and public events that send competing players on a collision course. **LEFT** The scale of the world makes big demands on art resources. Over 300 staff are working on the project overall, including the entire team that worked on *Bloodhunt*, plus more recent hires

reinforce one of *Exoborne*'s key themes — as Hultberg puts it, “thrive together or die alone.” This should be an apocalyptic story of survival through community, he adds, as in the likes of *The Walking Dead*. The game’s other main theme, conversely, explores humanity’s destructive side, especially with regard to technology, and how every human achievement is a double-edged sword. “I find it deeply fascinating that we have this tendency to invent fantastically cool shit,” Hultberg says, “then figure out how we can kill other people with it.”

Less clear at this stage is how these themes might cohabit, or whether that double-edged sword of technology really does cut both ways. Team-based killing and puzzling aside, there’s little obvious room for community in the extraction shooter format, nor is there any sign of tech being used to help build rather than destroy. Indeed, according to the game’s lore, many rigs were originally built for construction purposes, yet now find themselves repurposed as combat tools. At this stage, in a game about community, a core loop ►

THIS SHOULD BE AN APOCALYPTIC STORY
OF SURVIVAL THROUGH COMMUNITY

APOCALYPSE NOW



of endless shooting and looting sounds oddly nihilistic.

We can't help but query Sharkmob's choice of location for *Exorborne* as well – the fictional Colton County, in the US south-east. For a European company to situate its apocalypse in the States sounds like an opportunity missed, given how many times we've witnessed Armageddon across the pond in games and films alike. Yet, Hultberg counters, the familiarity here is quite deliberate. "We want to double down on this ground that we've seen in pop culture and movies," he says. "It's easy to play around with things that are both expected and unexpected. You get a lot of relatability for free." The geography – both natural and sociological – is ideal too, he continues. The diversity of environments in a single region of the US lends itself to multiple maps with distinct landscapes, while the unique abundance of billboards and commercial signage produces a

distinct décor. Plus, he concedes, it's a location the team is simply comfortable with. "Having grown up on American pop culture, we lean heavily on Hollywood realism."

Perhaps the most convincing argument for Colton, however, is that *Exorborne* specialises in turning everything upside down, subverting expectations in otherwise well-trodden paths. Boats can be spotted on top of buildings, for example. We see an oil rig in the middle of a forest, washed up by extreme tsunamis that recently ravaged this part of the world. "Both wind and water are very good at changing landscapes," Hultberg says. If the place is somewhat familiar, then, *Exorborne* could well dodge typical apocalypse fiction tropes. "We started looking at what types of disasters would affect us on a global scale," Hultberg says. "Most of them were super-cataclysmic, like a supervolcano or asteroid. And the

world you would have after those is the opposite of what we were interested in – grey, brown, ashes and dust." Admittedly, hitting the US with storms and hurricanes instead is relatively fresh gaming territory.

Even so, that does leave us wondering whether a game about destructive storms on America's south-east coast might feel a little too close to home for some. This is, after all, a region that's been battered by extreme weather in recent times, memories of hurricane Katrina still lingering, and it will be interesting to see how *Exorborne's* story marks those parallels in the context of its furore of fighting. At the moment, it seems that any social messages in the game will be much wider in scope, not least "that the world is not dying, humanity is," Hultberg explains. "Not all apocalypses are about the entire Earth dying – sometimes it can be just about humanity not coping." There's a sense of hope in this comment,



even if we may be too busy shooting each other to see it bloom.

But shooting is *Exoborne's* raison d'être, and cooperative and competitive multiplayer battles are still what motivate Hultberg and Mannerfelt most of all. "In the end, it's all about your own journey, to become stronger to be able to both survive and thrive in this world," Mannerfelt says. "We are way more interested in emergent player stories than campaign-type narratives," Hultberg concurs. "We talk a lot about memorable moments or watercooler moments — basically these events that you can't wait to tell your friends about the next day."

With so much experience in this field, though, they must be concerned that they're entering a crowded

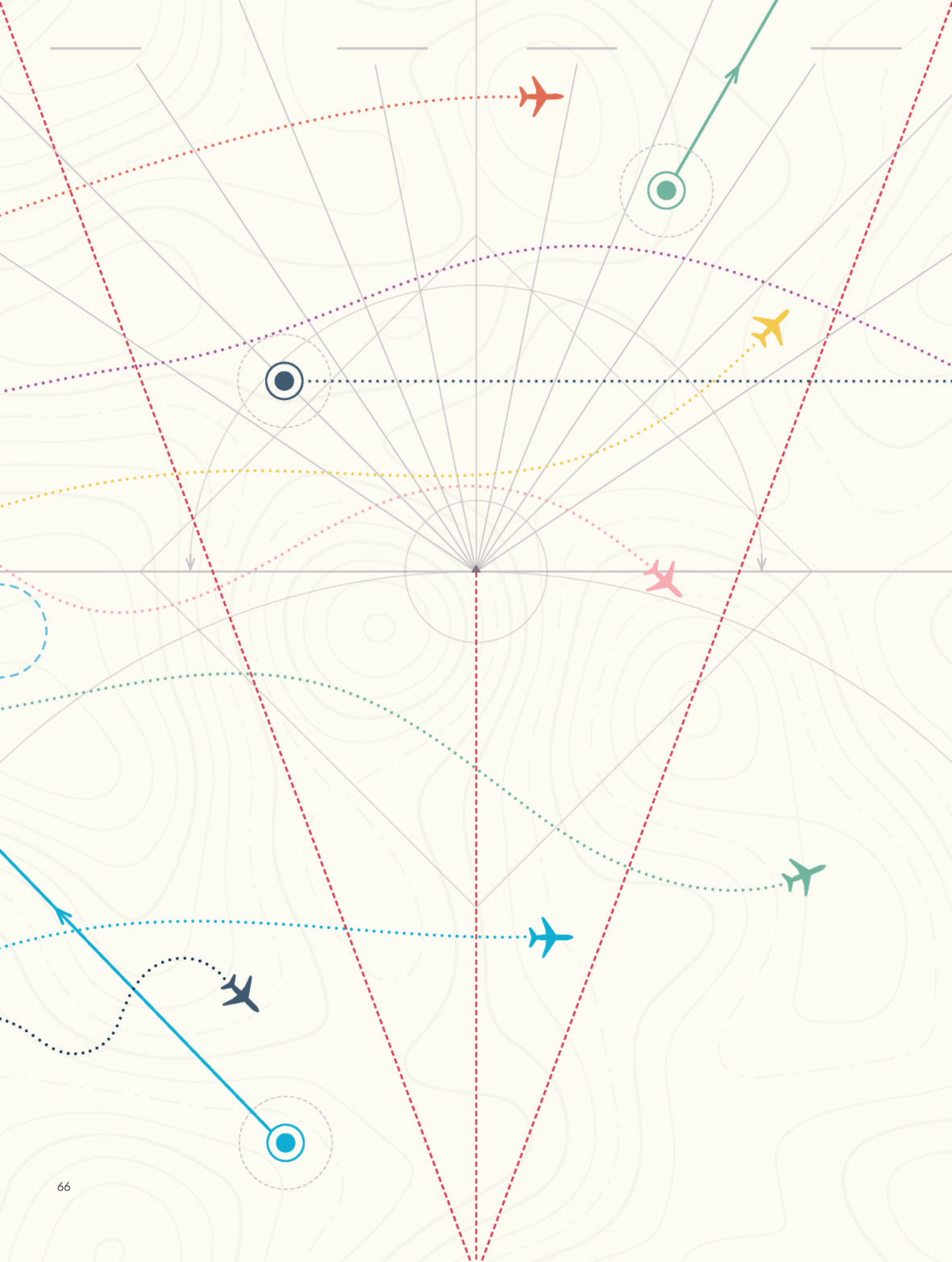
market for service games, one in which every success takes up considerable space and digs in for the long haul. Can they make a splash? One advantage they have, they believe, is that no extraction shooter has really become a mainstream name in the genre yet, in part due to that lack of approachability. "A couple of extraction shooters have attracted quite a lot of players, but they're not really massmarket yet," Mannerfelt says. "I think [*Exoborne*] has an opportunity to attract a massmarket audience." Certainly its production values should be high in comparison to others, while the story and quick potential for 'effed up' moments could be a healthy draw.

But the pair remain realistic about the size of the task. "You need to find

The largest map will be "big enough to drive around," Mannerfelt promises, as you employ vehicles you've commandeered from Rebirth forces on the move and also static facilities

the type of experience that you really want to create, and then you double down on that, and pray to all the lords that it works out," Hultberg says. It's not merely a matter of the game, he adds, but marketing, timing, avoiding development problems, and so on. "The main competitive problem now is how do you capture people from one playerbase and transfer them to another?" The process has things in common with the extraction shooter itself: selecting an effective loadout, performing at your peak, risking it all, and hoping you can escape with the loot before more competitors arrive. Yet Hultberg is optimistic: "One way to do it is to be first and to be disruptive. Another way is to be technically the best or offer social systems nobody else does. I think there's still an opportunity to be the best in this genre." In short, perhaps, *Exoborne* needs to herald the rebirth of its chosen genre, and truly deliver the world. ■

"HAVING GROWN UP ON AMERICAN POP CULTURE, WE LEAN ON HOLLYWOOD REALISM"





F L Y I N G

S O L O

Going it alone in modern game development

By LEWIS PACKWOOD

With the unprecedented wave of layoffs the game industry faced in 2023, more developers than ever before are wondering whether they can make it on their own. Surely, the thinking goes, striking out alone must beat toiling away for an employer that might not even want you sticking around once your current project has shipped. But does the reality stand up?

To find out, we talk to four solo developers to discover their experiences. **Tomas Sala** quit the company he founded

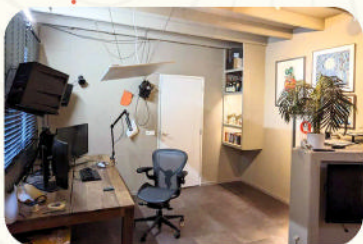
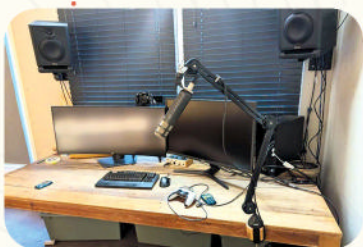
to make *The Falconeer*; **Lucy Blundell** abandoned a career at Chillingo to create the acclaimed visual novels *One Night Stand* and *Videoverse*; **Madison Karrh** only found enough stability to leave her job making medical simulators with her third game, *Birth*; while **Joe Richardson**, creator of *The Procession To Calvary*, has only ever known solo development.

How lonely is it to make games without a team in support? What kinds of compromises — artistic and financial — are required? And is all the risk worth it to be master of your own destiny?



SHED WORKS

Tomas Sala works out of a wooden shed in his garden, a studio he built with the money he made from *The Falconeer*. He shares it with his wife, who has a ceramics workshop under the same roof. Even though he found the release of *The Falconeer* stressful, and spent a long time fixing bugs and working hard on the console conversions, he's ultimately pleased with its performance. "I really can't complain about how it's gone," he says.



Tomas Sala (left) is currently working on *Bulwark: Falconeer Chronicles*, a sequel to *The Falconeer* which ditches flight in favour of city building

Tomas Sala clearly has no regrets about leaving behind the corporate cage he helped to build. "I hate fucking Scrum and Trello, all this fucking Jira," he spits. "It drives me up the wall."

After co-founding Little Chicken Game Company in Amsterdam with his brother and two others in 2001, Sala spent the next decade and a half building up the firm, which at one stage employed around 30 people. The company mostly took on work-for-hire jobs, which Sala says helped him to build up his skills by working on a wide range of projects. But he didn't like being the boss, didn't like having to constantly organise a team of people. "I am incredibly chaotic," he admits.

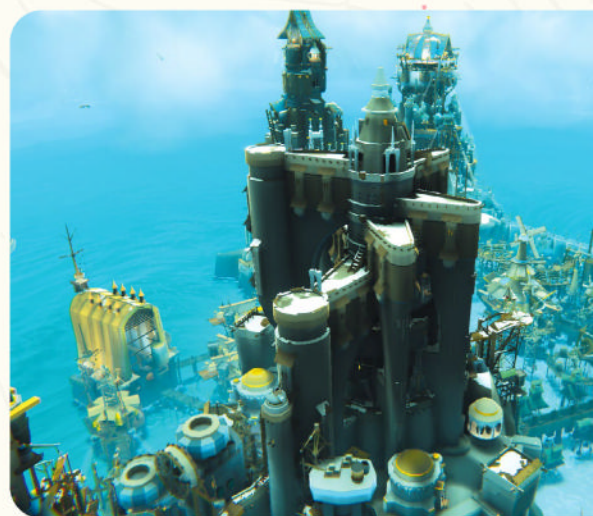
Sala started making mods to decompress, eventually releasing the *Skyrim*-based *Moonpath To Elsweyr* in 2017. It was received well enough to encourage him to start work on a game of his own, called *Oberon's Court*. Sala's wife, Camille, pointed out how the darkness of *Oberon's Court* reflected the burnout he was experiencing at the time. The realisation prompted Sala to rip up the project and build something entirely different using the assets he'd created. *The Falconeer*, a breezy aerial combat adventure inspired by *Crimson Skies*, was the result. It's tempting to see it as a reflection of his flight from the corporate world.

It's certainly a freedom in which he has revelled. Sala believes that boiling game development down into a list of tasks, as encouraged by project-management tools such as Jira, can turn what should be a creative adventure into a slog. Instead, he prefers exploring, chasing "that subconscious flow" in

the manner of "creators outside of games who aren't stuck to that Jira fucking pegboard". Though Sala insists he is "quite disciplined" and keeps track of the things that need to be done in any given week, he also allows himself the room to deviate from that path when inspiration strikes. Such as waking up with the idea of making flying eels with guns, for example, and then diving straight in to create it. "I love feature creep," he says. "It's my entire design philosophy."

Sala's latest game, *Bulwark: Falconeer Chronicles*, is a city builder that he says reflects his chaotic nature, where buildings sprout and grow like flowers rather than being laid out in a grid. At the same time, it's a more relaxing experience than his previous games, which were about "wanting to be free, or conflict, or whatever was bothering me at the time". It's an example of the unfiltered relationship between author and art that can make games from solo developers so fascinating to play – and with Sala now feeling more settled, *Bulwark* is about "feeling safe and creative".

Getting to this point of safety, though, has been a rocky road. Sala talks about what he calls "the fear": the fear of failure, the fear of not being able to support his family. The hard-won release of *The Falconeer* in 2020 was undermined by his relentless perfectionism and feelings of impostor syndrome.



“Every negative review hits like ten, and every positive like one,” he explains. “So you’re focusing on all the negatives, which caused me to work like an animal for a year after just to make it better and get the best possible version out there.”

Sala admits he is something of a workaholic. “My only response when things get stressful is to work harder,” he laments. But he also realises that it would be unrealistic to repeat the work marathon he undertook around the release of *The Falconeer*, which took an enormous toll, and which he is keen to avoid doing again. Nevertheless, the fear persists. “I have a lot of fears about not being secure, not being able to provide, but also an intense ego or drive to make something that’s good. Your internal artistic critic that says ‘this is crap’ is always rearing its head.”

For Lucy Blundell, going solo meant leaving her first industry job, at Macclesfield-based mobile game publisher Chillingo. She’d joined as a graphic designer almost straight out of university, and found herself responsible for all graphical design, on promotional and in-game artwork alike. “Back then they were putting out one or two mobile games a week,” she says. “It was really crazy. I remember that first year, I couldn’t really go on holiday, because when I did, stuff just stopped.” When EA acquired Chillingo in 2010, it

SALA ALLOWS HIMSELF THE ROOM
TO DEVIATE FROM THE PATH.
“I LOVE FEATURE CREEP. IT’S MY
ENTIRE DESIGN PHILOSOPHY”

brought in another artist to ease the workload – but with the mobile game market shifting in the wake of *Candy Crush*, Blundell faced a new problem. “At that point, EA switched focus: they wanted us to try and find another big, free-to-play kind of game,” she says. “I just didn’t like mobile games at this point. I was feeling a bit icky about them.”

At the same time, there were few options for advancement at Chillingo, except moving into marketing for a bigger pay cheque. “I didn’t really want to do that,” she says. “Money’s not a huge driver for me, but being creative and learning is.” She thought about applying for a job at a big game studio, but worried that her art skills weren’t at the required level. “My 3D art was OK, but it wasn’t great. My 2D art was all right, but not good enough.” It

was a predicament that left her feeling stuck. So she quit.

EA’s buyout of Chillingo had provided Blundell with a cash and stock payout, and she used those savings as a safety net while she established herself as a solo developer under the name Kinmoku. Knowing her programming skills weren’t fantastic, she decided to make visual novels, whose coding requirements would be relatively simple. By being thrifty, and taking the odd side job doing background art, proofreading and even wedding invitations, she reckoned she could stretch out her savings for a couple of years or more.

But going solo had another cost. “I got really lonely at the beginning, because I’d gone from this really friendly office where all my mates were, and where I met my husband,” ▶



Sala recalls that the experience of launching *The Falconeer* was far from triumphant. “There was a pressure that I don’t care to repeat,” he says. “Then, when release happened, I was all over the place”

"TRY AND WORK ON SOMETHING
YOU CAN GET DONE IN SIX
MONTHS. IT'S PROBABLY STILL
GONNA TAKE TWO YEARS"

she recalls. "It was really sad to leave that and just be on my own." Moving to Germany after her partner secured a job at Nintendo only exacerbated that loneliness.

Blundell says that, as a shy introvert, she tends to work well on her own — so she was surprised to find how much this affected her. "There are still days when I feel pretty lonely," she says, adding that social media can help with the need for human contact, along with networking events and conferences such as GDC. "You go from nothing, pretty much not talking to anyone, to talking to everyone for like a whole week. Which I do love, but I'm always exhausted by the end of it. It's not a nice [day-to-day] balance, like you get in an office." She admits that when an event is coming up, she will practise talking ahead of time to get used to it again.



CANINE CONTACT

"The dog gets me out," says Lucy Blundell, her pooch providing her with the excuse to wander out at lunchtime and strike up conversations at the local dog park. Likewise, Madison Karrh says that having a pet is a great way of pushing her to maintain social contact. She even talks to her dog, Spaghetti, and sings to her on occasion. "Recently someone was watching her when we had gotten back from a trip, and so there were a few days where I was by myself," Karrh says. "And I didn't go outside, I did not open my mouth to speak. And I was like, wow, if I did not have a dog, I would be a very different person. I think I would be a much less balanced person."

Blundell's first big project as a solo dev, *Love IRL*, was never finished. After a year, she had coded the first half of the game (about three hours of gameplay) up to a point where the player makes a decision that could take them along one of four branches. "These routes are all pretty much as long as that beginning," she says. She realised that coding those four branches, around 12 hours in total, could take another four years. "And it was like, 'Oh my god, I can't do that!'"

She tried altering the scope of the project, but it felt like too much of a compromise. Instead, she put *Love IRL* aside, and made her debut, *One Night Stand*, as part of a game jam. "It was just done in like a month, and then I put it out. No fanfare, didn't contact anyone, just put it on Itch.io — and then I went on holiday. And while I was away it started getting covered by really big YouTubers." The resulting buzz meant the free version of *One Night Stand* ended up being downloaded around a quarter of a million times. So Blundell set about polishing and updating the game, then released a paid version on Steam for £2.99. "It's crazy to think that I still get almost enough money from that now to keep doing what I'm doing." At least, as long as she lives thriftily. "I think the craziest thing I ever did was [after] *One Night Stand* had a really good week, when it got nominated for IGF," she says. "I was like, 'I'm buying an iPad, and buying the best one, the really big one, and I'm getting an Apple Pencil,' and I just waltzed into the store and got it. Even then, it was for work."

Blundell's next project followed a similar trajectory to *Love IRL*. After



three years of work, she realised she was never going to finish it, so it was abandoned in favour of 2023's *Videoverse*. She reckoned that would be a quick turnaround, taking no more than a year. It ended up taking three. "In the last couple of years, the finances from *One Night Stand* were starting to go down, and I was like, 'I need to get this done quickly!'" she says. "And that's quite scary. So I had a lot of pressure on me — it was almost like there was someone behind me the whole time, [saying] 'Work! Hurry up!'"

Along the way, a lot of elements were cut — one positive, for Blundell, of working alone. "I'm only hurting myself when I do that. I'm not letting down all the artists, or the writers, or whoever's made all that



stuff.” But no work is ever completely wasted: some elements of *Love IRL* made their way into *Videoverse*, and Blundell files any unused art assets away in a library in case they come in handy another day. Plus, having complete control over her games means that she can decide to offset any setbacks in development by running a sale on old games or taking on side work to bring in extra cash.

Given her experiences, it’s no surprise to hear Blundell’s one piece of advice for anyone who thinking of going down the solo development route themselves: always keep the project small. “Just try and work on something you can get done in six months,” she says, “because it’s probably still gonna take two years.”

Not every solo developer comes from inside the game industry. Before making 2023’s *Birth*, Madison Karrh worked at construction equipment manufacturer Caterpillar and made games for training doctors — and before that was following a different path entirely. “For most of my life, I just wanted to teach kindergarten,” she says. It was during her education degree, during a class on teaching maths, that Karrh had her awakening. “I just loved it so much, and thought I wanted to be a mathematician,” she says. “And then I learned how to code, and loved code even more. So that’s when I switched my major to computer science.”

That led her to Caterpillar, where she developed financial ▶

Lucy Blundell’s *LoveIRL* (main and top left) and *Memories* (other shots) were put to one side, but some of their ideas made it into 2023’s *Videoverse*



Lucy Blundell, whose games are published via the online alias of Kinmoku





software, thinking that any programming job would provide fun challenges and problems. This one wouldn't. Faced with a desperately unfulfilling day job, she turned to making videogames as a creative outlet. "I played games as a child," she says, "and then there was a big chunk of my life [when I] missed out on games – I just thought they weren't really for me. And then I fell back in love with them in my 20s."

She put out her first project, *Whimsy*, in 2019. "It's not a good game," she says, citing the puzzles' difficulty and the "awful" UI. But Karrh is still fond of it – "it's like looking through a little diary of where I was at the time" – and proud of the fact she finished it. Yet, even as she ached for a creative role that would free her from the world of financial software, Karrh didn't feel confident that the project had developed her skills enough to be hired by a videogame studio. At least, not the traditional kind.



A dog isn't an essential part of the solo developer's suite of tools, but it can't hurt. Spaghetti, Madison Karrh's mutt, gives her an excuse to get outside



Chicago-based Level Ex is a supplier of what Karrh calls "very gross medical simulations" for doctors. On one hand, it meant she got to use Unity in her day job and work with some smart people; on the other, she wasn't too thrilled about creating gamified versions of knee surgery, and the research that was required. But she acknowledges that her experiences influenced her later games. "Working at Level Ex made me less squeamish about the body, and I think as a result there are a lot of gross bits in *Birth*, but it's presented in a much kinder way."

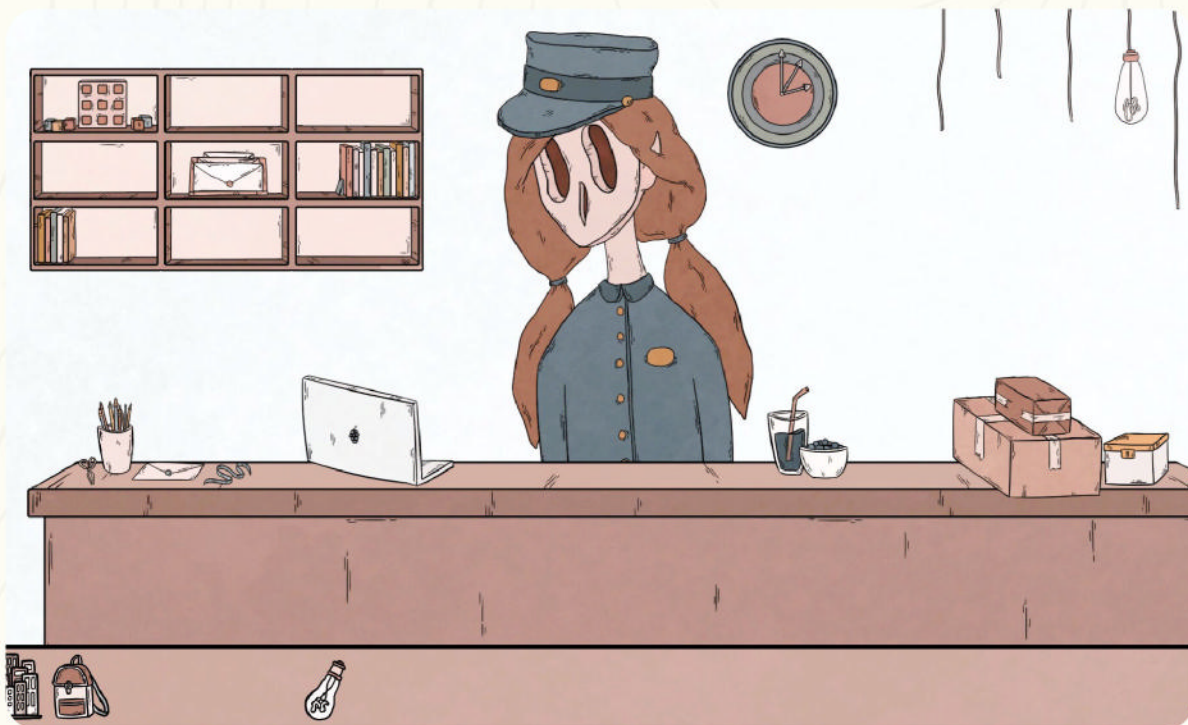
It was only while working on that game, her third after 2021's *Landlord Of The Woods*, that Karrh considered making game development a full-time job. This was made possible in part by WINGS Interactive, which provides funding for women and marginalised gender developers. Karrh admits she was "very ignorant about the games industry in general," so was delighted to discover that there were bodies that would actually pay developers to finish making videogames. "I thought all your money comes when you release the game." A successful application meant enough cash to sustain her for a year, and leave her job at Level Ex. "Oh my gosh, it was so scary," she says, but reasoned that if *Birth* was a flop and money ran out, she could always just get another job.

Still, it took a while for her to adapt to going solo. "If you're not working on something, nothing is getting done on your project," she says. "You can't take a day off and come back and think, 'I wonder what happened while I was gone?' Because nothing



"YOU CAN'T TAKE A DAY OFF
AND THINK, 'I WONDER WHAT
HAPPENED WHILE I WAS GONE?'
BECAUSE NOTHING HAPPENED"





happened while you were gone.” And although Karrh loved handling the programming and art for *Birth* (pictured on this spread), being a solo developer meant doing absolutely everything for herself, including the marketing – which she found much less enjoyable. She adds that music is her “weakest link”, and that she relied on public-domain classical songs for *Birth*, although she would like to work with a composer in the future.

There’s also, again, the fear. Karrh says that sales of *Birth* were initially disappointing, with fewer than expected Steam wishlist conversions. “For the first two months after *Birth*’s [release], I was like, ‘OK, I’ll have to get a job in a month or so.’” It was only after several TikTokkers made videos about the game that things picked up. She says it’s now selling “more than I need it to”, adding that another benefit of being a solo developer is that the bar for success is much lower, since there’s only one mouth to feed. “I feel the fear a little less now,” she says. “And I think it’s because I’ve come to terms with the fact that if I need to go back and get a job, I will be fine.

I also know that you can make something while you’re working full-time. Of course, this is coming from someone who is not a parent and has a very easygoing life.”

That’s not the case for Joe Richardson, solo developer of *The Procession To Calvary*, who has two children to support. But he started making games in his mid-20s, while at art school; after graduating, his aim was to “not have to do a real job”. He’d started working part-time in a screen-printing studio while studying, although his role was mostly cleaning gear and fetching bacon rolls rather than printing.

Finishing *The Preposterous Awesomeness Of Everything*, the game he’d begun at uni, took another year, alongside part-time work at the screen-printing studio and “surviving off the dregs of a student loan and living as frugally as can be done in London”. He reasoned that if the game did well, he’d be able to continue as a developer. “And if it didn’t, I’d have to get a real job,” he says. “And then I released it, and it did very, very, very badly. It sold 15 copies on day one.” ▶



LOVE AND UNDER-STANDING

“My partner is also a creative human, so I have that in common with them,” says Madison Karrh (above), who thinks that solo development requires an understanding partner. “As someone who has decided that I will spend a huge amount of time by myself at my desk for my lifetime, it’s really important for me to have someone that understands that need, and who shares that. Not someone who’s like, ‘Come away from your desk – I haven’t seen you in so long.’”

Prior to this, he'd had good reason to think the game might do well: PewDiePie, one of the world's most popular YouTubers, had shown interest in the project, and Richardson had included his likeness in the game alongside those of Kickstarter backers. "Not knowing the industry at all, I thought, 'Well, I've made it,'" Richardson says. "I'm going to release the game, he's going to tweet about it because he's in it, and I'm famous. And right up until release, he was messaging back and forth, and so I thought, here we go: hit 'Release'; wait for the money to rain down on me. And then silence from PewDiePie, silence from the world." Richardson says he never got to the bottom of why PewDiePie



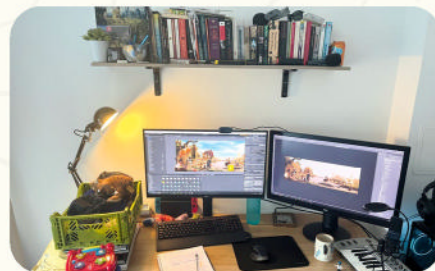
HOLD THAT THOUGHT

Tomas Sala might have little love for project management tools, but Joe Richardson (above) is longing for something to help him stay more organised. "I don't have a good system for keeping track of things," he admits. Instead, what Richardson has is a notebook (right). "My whole book here is just to-do lists, slowly ticked off, and it's not in any way organised. So it could be 'Reply to this email', or it could be 'Add a background to the dialogue so it's easier to read'." He says he has never even heard of Jira, although he's aware of such project management tools, and can see how they could be useful in his work. "Because scrolling back through five pages to check for any things that haven't been checked off and then moving them back to the front isn't a good system."

stopped replying, and why he never mentioned the game's release.

This should have been the point where, as per the agreement with his girlfriend, Richardson left solo development behind. He sent out a few speculative applications to small game studios, but his heart wasn't in it. "Secretly I was fully focused on just making another game," he says. That was *Four Last Things*, a point-and-click adventure built from repurposed Renaissance art in only a year — something he finds hard to believe now, having worked on his latest game, *Death Of The Reprobate*, for some three and a half years. But times were desperate. For the final few months of development on *Four Last Things*, money was so tight that he had to ask his girlfriend to cover his rent.

So what kept him going? He partly attributes his resistance to getting a 'real job' to his social awkwardness and anxiety. "But also an inflated sense of my own self-worth," he says. "I felt like I should be making my own thing, not making someone else's thing." Like Sala, he enjoys being able to do as he wants. "But there's also got to be an assumption that what you

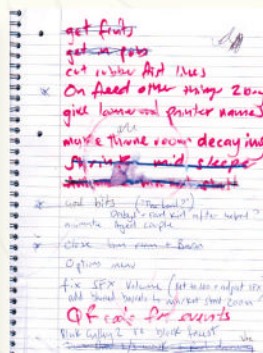
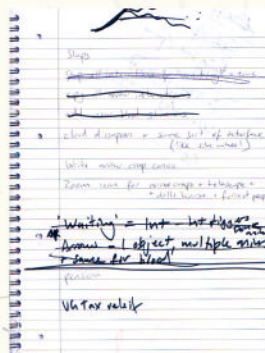


Joe Richardson's workstation is more organised than his notebook-based production system might lead you to expect, although it doesn't preclude the odd discarded kids' toy

want is somehow important: 'I should make what I want, because I'm capable of making something great: I think that ultimately what makes an artist an artist is that they're an arrogant prick.'

Yet Richardson is also incredibly self-deprecating about his work. So how does this square with his supposedly inflated sense of self-worth? "Maybe it's that I don't think I'm making great art, [but] I think I'm capable of making great art," he suggests. "So I think I'm also making shit. Having ridiculous expectations of what I'm capable of makes me view not only everyone else's work but also my own work as substandard."

Though *Four Last Things* (centre right) wasn't a big success, it sold





Woman Surrounded by Severed Heads



enough for Richardson to justify keeping going. He was still picking up shifts at the screen-printing studio, but occasionally started saying no to work. "Then one day I realised I hadn't worked for six months, and I was like, 'Oh, wait a minute, I'm a professional videogame developer now!'"

The game has continued to sell steadily. "I think, particularly with adventure games, the long tail is really important, because my games are 20 years out of date to start with, so it doesn't matter if you're a few years late to the party." But what

has allowed Richardson to remain a solo developer is the greater success of his next game, *The Procession To Calvary* (above). "For the two years after release, I was rich," he laughs. "But I know I'm not. If that was my actual salary, I'd be rich. But that's my income for those two years. If you factor in the previous ten years, if you think about the next ten years, it's hard to get too excited."

There's that fear again. "I don't know how successful the next game will be," he says. "I'm in a position where I know it's not going to sell zero, which is nice. But it might sell, like, not well at all."

When Richardson set out as a solo developer, he thought he would be happy if he could make a living from his art. But now, with two children to support, he realises he also needs a safety net, a sense of stability. He accepts that he might be able to gain that by signing a deal with a publisher, but he doesn't want to do that, to cede that control. So for now, at least, it's back to what he knows best. "Make a thing, then sell the thing," he laughs. "That's my plan." ■

"MY GAMES ARE 20 YEARS OUT OF DATE TO START WITH, SO IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE A FEW YEARS LATE TO THE PARTY"

A close-up portrait of Ikumi Nakamura, a woman with short dark hair, looking slightly to the side. The background is warm and blurred, with diagonal light streaks. A white diamond shape is overlaid on the lower half of the image, containing text. An orange vertical bar is on the left edge.

AN AUDIENCE WITH...

IKUMI
NAKAMURA

From artist to studio head, how
Unseen's CEO is breaking
boundaries and borders

BY ALAN WEN

Photography Liam Wong

Located in an old warehouse in Tsukishima, a working-class neighbourhood of Tokyo, Unseen Inc makes for quite the contrast to the corporate offices where **Ikumi Nakamura** started her career. She joined Capcom in 2004 as an environment artist, before following two of the publisher's brightest creative minds to their own videogame studios: first Hideki Kamiya's PlatinumGames, then Shinji Mikami's Tangoameworks.

It was at the latter company that she first caught the public's attention, after taking to Bethesda's E3 conference stage in 2019 to announce *Ghostwire: Tokyo*. However, she left the project and Tango later that year, due in part to health problems. Taking the opportunity to form her own game company, Nakamura's aim — as she first told us in **E371** — was to create a 'borderless' studio.

In part, that refers to Unseen's hybrid mode of working. "Before [the pandemic], I had already been thinking for several years about the possibility of making videogames remotely as a studio," Nakamura tells us, "where team members didn't have to come to Japan." Accordingly, it also means a multicultural studio, with 90 per cent of its employees coming from overseas, leveraging AI "to help translate and streamline communication" between Japanese and English speakers.

While we can't help but notice the bonsai tree and traditional paper lantern decorating its entrance, Unseen is not what Nakamura would call a Japanese company — certainly not in terms of the strict corporate hierarchy for which they are typically renowned. Indeed, to illustrate this, she casually calls two overseas staff members over to our meeting for their input. "[Unseen] is obviously not very corporate at all — we just try to be mutually respectful while also trying to make a good game," one team member says. Their colleague, having worked at a major Japanese publisher previously, is more to the point: "We're treated like adults here."

That difference becomes clear as we sit down with Nakamura on floor cushions, in a central meeting room (pictured above) that feels more like a festival tent or perhaps an artists' studio in the mode of Warhol's Factory. Indeed, Nakamura refers to the studio's developers, regardless of discipline, as artists. "A lot of companies are publisher-driven but I don't like that," she says. "This place is driven by passionate artists."

Has running a videogame studio always been an ambition of yours?

Since I was in middle school, I wanted to be a game developer. That's what I had in my mind to pursue, and it hasn't changed since. But when you're actually hired, you



"A LOT OF COMPANIES ARE PUBLISHER-DRIVEN BUT I DON'T LIKE THAT," SHE SAYS. "THIS PLACE IS DRIVEN BY PASSIONATE ARTISTS"

don't even know what you're going to be doing — you're just hired by a game company, and they tell you what you need to do. So I was told to become an environment artist, and that's how I started. During that time, I always wanted to be a concept artist. 2D art was something I was most interested in, so I was a full-on artist back then. I had never dreamed of running my own studio as a CEO.

But it was while I was actually a creative director back in 2019 that the idea and opportunity of creating a new studio [emerged]. It was from meeting people after E3 and visiting other game studios, where people were telling me, "Ikumi, if you gather and put together a team and create a great environment, it's going to be a great game company that makes a really great game". So that's what I decided to do. Creating and running a game company was what I became focused on.

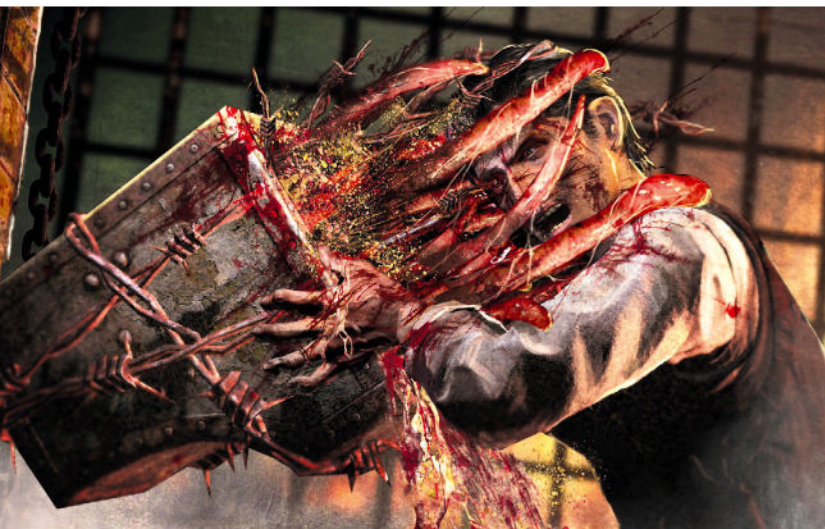
Having started out as an artist, how did the opportunity emerge to transition to the position of creative director at Tangoameworks?

In my previous workplace, I faced challenging interpersonal dynamics where there was a culture of hierarchy and rigidity. It often felt like standing out would lead to being pushed down, even if you excelled. During that time, I had the opportunity to contribute to a spinoff project from *The Evil Within*, featuring a new story with Joseph Oda as the protagonist. I was responsible for art direction in a relatively small team. ►



Despite joining Capcom wanting to make a horror game like *Resident Evil*, it would be nearly a decade into Nakamura's career before she would work on its spiritual successor, *The Evil Within*

AN AUDIENCE WITH...



CV

After graduating at Tokyo's Amusement Media Academy with a degree in game design, Ikumi Nakamura's first job was as a background artist at Capcom's short-lived Clover Studio, where she contributed to *Okami*. She then rejoined her old bosses Hideki Kamiya, Shinji Mikami and Atsushi Inaba at PlatinumGames, as concept artist for *Bayonetta*, before following Mikami to Tango Gameworks to become lead artist on *The Evil Within* (above) and its sequel, *Ghostwire: Tokyo*, on which she was the original creative director, was her breakthrough game, although she departed from Tango before the game launched, and moved on to set up a new studio, Unseen Inc.

However, our director had to take leave due to some health matters, and the team navigated without direction for about a month. When he returned, he candidly shared his lack of confidence in resuming the director role, due to his health. That's when I saw an opportunity and stepped up, offering to take on the role myself. I saw it as a chance to create a project with a forward-looking perspective. I didn't hesitate to volunteer because I believed I could craft a game for the next generation.

From there, I began conceptualising not another instalment of *The Evil Within* but the inception of *Ghostwire: Tokyo*. Crafting pitch decks and presenting to Bethesda was an incredibly exciting journey. It was where I learned the art of securing budgets and resources. I seized opportunities, displayed leadership, and took initiative when the situation demanded it. What I did was perhaps unconventional and it led to some complications that put a constraint on my creative freedom. That's when I began to realise that I was not in the right environment to achieve personal growth.

Given how different Unseen is from the studios you've worked at previously in your career, where did you look for inspiration?

After I left Tango Gameworks, I went to many game studios all over the world, including in Montreal, the States, and England. I experienced the kind of environment in which other big studios make games. It made me question why in Japan we have to be stuck in this concrete box with bright white fluorescent lights – to me, that's not creative at all! When you think of other creative artists, they have a tendency to retreat to the mountains or the middle of nowhere to make their art. It's kind of similar for game making where, as a creator, to be creative, the place needs to be inspiring and fun. So that's why I built this studio from the ground up, to suit that need.

I have taken inspiration from many cool studios, including Riot and Sony Santa Monica, but that being said, I have a very clear idea about what kind of environment I want to make games in. At the same time

"WE'RE ATTRACTING MORE GENERALIST DEVELOPERS. WE ARE BUILDING A TEAM WHERE 50 PEOPLE CAN PERFORM LIKE 100"

as I was making this particular space, I had a couple of the game creators already with me, so we talked about things we would like to include. It was designed as our vision together. There were a lot of things moving at once: building a new IP, building a new company, and building this space. So there were all kinds of influences in how this place looks. This place is, as we speak, still evolving. Things are constantly changing, but it starts from here.

On the topic of growing, Unseen's current headcount is smaller than the teams you've previously worked with – how does that affect the scope of the games you plan to make?

I think this is the part of this company that has grown the most, and the part that has been a challenge. In terms of scale, it is quite small, but [it's] a small group of elite artists. We're actually attracting more generalist developers instead of specialists, so there is more flexibility there. Based on that, we are actually building a team where 50 people can perform like 100. We don't really envision our company growing much larger than what we currently are. Instead, we want to have a very focused team.

We'll outsource, too, but even outsourcing is very selective. I'm quite picky about who I work with – not just in the studio we use, but the individual person or freelancer. I don't like the term 'outsourcing', actually. I want us as a unit and a team, so when I have worked with outsourcing artists, they are treated like actual members of the team. I guess that's just a characteristic of my development style!

Presumably generalists tend to have more experience and also opportunities for branching out, just as you have, so does that mean you're reticent to hire more junior developers?

To be honest, it's quite difficult to find generalist talent, but we do find them. As far as hiring junior talents go, I've seen younger developers who can also be generalists too. But for us to actually be able to hire a junior, we as

senior artists or managers have to make sure we're growing properly too. That's really important, because you want your lead to be awesome, right? In some companies, juniors are brought in but it doesn't lead to growth at all. Especially in Japan, anything that sticks out gets hammered down, which I really hate. So we are still in the process of being ready, as a mature team, so that we can actually welcome junior talent and then actually provide them with a good environment to grow.

My experience as an artist, then becoming a creative director, did actually have an influence on learning to be more of a generalist. [A specialist] doesn't go across to a different department as much, and that's fine too – that's one way to actually make a game. But in my team I want the artist to go beyond their boundaries and into different departments, which allows for more collaboration. That's why a more generalist artist is a better fit for this team. I'm learning new things every day from team members – that's something I actually look forward to every day.

Were there any lessons you took from working with Kamiya and Mikami that have fed into how you're running your own studio?

Both Mikami and Kamiya have been more game directors than CEOs, strictly speaking, so it's a different kind of job category here. The things I'm doing at Unseen are quite opposite from what they were doing at the companies I was working at before. That said, I do get told I have a very similar personality to Kamiya. We're both quite childish and mischievous in our own ways. We're just a bit wild and do what we want to do – but I won't be putting down other gamers on Twitter! Kamiya-san actually told me, "Be wild!" Basically, get noticed. Whether you're a director or concept artist, make sure you're being wild, active and energetic. So that's something he taught me that I guess I'm doing.

While those former bosses are generally thought of as auteurs, you've named this studio Unseen, which implies a degree of anonymity. How do you feel about being a studio figurehead?

I definitely want the game to be *Unseen's* game, not Ikumi Nakamura's game – it's not I but us, the team, who made this game. I don't like having my name attached to the game and that's why my name is not in the company's name. We've actually been doing spotlights of our developers working on the game on the company's website, where each person has been interviewed one by one to talk about their role. So I'm intending that the whole team has visibility, and the focus is on everyone, not just me.

On the note of proper credit, there was some discussion at the time of *Ghostwire: Tokyo's* release

about you receiving a 'special thanks' when most people were aware that you were the game's original creative director. How did you feel about that?

I did leave the team in the middle, so I think the spotlight should go to people who actually finished the game and really committed to it. However, if there is a game that people have been involved in making, then ideally all those members should be actually credited with the proper title of what they've actually done as a sign of respect, as the bare minimum. So that's how I feel about that. But it's still very common for many publishers that, if you leave, your name is not credited [at all], so a 'special thanks' is still a special thanks!

You're one of very few female studio heads in Japan, certainly at this kind of scale and visibility. Does that bring extra pressure? And do you feel more conscious responsibility for helping other women or minority groups to thrive in the industry?

Being female certainly does have some influence on how you run a company. There's things that you only understand fully because you're female – for instance, being a mother and managing your physical and mental health. So I want to make sure that, as a female CEO, I am creating a studio environment where women actually feel comfortable and considered, especially in the Japanese games industry where women are still a small minority. That being said, there's plenty of talented people here, so I'm trying to attract talented artists regardless of whether they're male or female.

Working in this industry around the clock as a woman, sometimes you get your period and you find out you need a product. I've always thought that a company



While Nakamura's designs have featured in collaborations with other games, such as *Dead By Daylight*, this is as an individual – Unseen isn't engaging in work for hire

Nakamura was behind the conceptual design of *Bayonetta*, a game where evidently not just its heroine but also the enemies and environments are larger than life



Kemuri tasks yokai hunters with pursuing unseen enemies and transforming your character's appearance by 'wearing the paranormal'. The studio has made the latter idea literal by opening an online apparel store featuring its artwork



"GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO FELT LIKE GIVING BIRTH TO A CHILD AND THEN ENTRUSTING ANOTHER PERSON TO ACTUALLY RAISE THE CHILD"

should take care of that inconvenience, but you just don't have that — I'd always have to run out to a convenience store to pick some up. I've always experienced this type of thing, so I want to make sure that this studio is comfortable for women to work in. In some companies out there, you can't actually bring your child to the office. I really can't comprehend that, so at Unseen we're very open if you bring your child here. Whether you're a mother or father, if you need to take care of your baby, we provide a space for them while they work.

You might have also noticed the floor of this studio is also all slopes. We have no steps, and it's been designed so that if someone has a wheelchair then they can come to work here as well. We haven't actually hired anyone who uses a wheelchair yet, but we are ready for them in the future. We are ready for everybody!

Having left projects before completion — or, in the case of *Scalebound*, working on a project that was cancelled — do you feel there's anything you learned from those times in particular, or is it more about regrets from which you just have to move forward?

Scalebound actually got cancelled a few years after I had left the team. So during my career I haven't experienced a game getting cancelled while I was working on it. Even so, it's still not a good feeling to have invested in a project that gets cancelled by the publisher. It is also a learning experience, because it's a game that the publisher decided is not going to be the right product to release. I definitely think there's a reason that decisions like that are made.

As for *Ghostwire: Tokyo*, it's something that I did actually have to leave in the middle. It felt like giving birth to a child and then entrusting another person to actually raise the child, which is a hard situation. My true feeling was that I also wanted to raise the child as well, but there were certain situations that didn't allow me to do that. Though this child was just four years old, their personality and individuality were already taking shape. So, even without a parent like me around, I could entrust them to the team and consider the outcome as the adult they'll become. I've come to understand that by

delegating my responsibilities and moving on to the next step, I mitigated the risk of my passion as an artist stagnating. It was time to embrace change and keep moving forward.

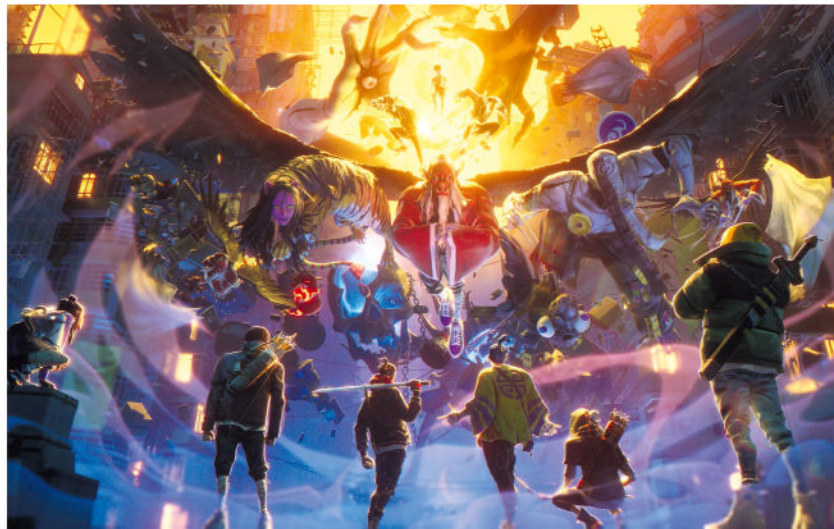
In the spirit of moving forward, Unseen's debut, *Kemuri*, is another supernatural action game, yet it also appears to have a different kind of energy and atmosphere from what you've done in this genre before. Is that a fair observation?

The concept for a project like this has been brewing in my mind since my middle-school days. Scratch that, even earlier. To be honest, it's like the culmination of dreams from my otaku era, an initiative that breathes life into those long-held aspirations. While my fascination with the mysterious and supernatural may have influenced my work, *Kemuri* presents a unique opportunity in my career, diverging from my past endeavours.

Okami remains one of the most memorable experiences in my career, and I had always set out to challenge stylised depictions. My intention is to craft a game within my expertise [that's] mysterious and otherworldly. Somehow, we have forgotten old tales, lost our beliefs, and misplaced the sense of mystery. Imagine a blend of absurdity, grandiosity and cheerful comedy colliding with seriousness, all wrapped up in a package of both positivity and negativity. Within this chaotic mix, there's always room for jokes and heartfelt moments that push the boundaries of the unexpected. Nevertheless, in this world, they persist as an unending presence among us.

Obviously it's still early days for the studio, but what do you envision for *Kemuri* and also Unseen as a whole over the next few years?

The brilliance of the unknown intensifies as it gradually unveils itself. The inherent nature of the unknown, shrouded in mystery, captivates human curiosity, giving rise to novel mysteries in turn. It is an infinite process, and attempting to quantify its extent is a formidable undertaking. ■



Although Nakamura is cryptic about specifics when it comes to *Kemuri*, she says its setting is "a nostalgic and chaotic multicultural world", as illustrated in this concept art (top)

T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



H A L O W A R S

How Ensemble's final game went from skunkworks experiment to part of Microsoft's biggest series

By **CALLUM BAINS**

Format 360, PC
Developer Microsoft Game Studios
Publisher Ensemble Studios
Origin US
Release 2009

Given the opportunity to do anything, what would you choose? When Ensemble Studios' management team asked itself this question, in late 2004, there was a consensus: *not this*. The studio had spent the better part of a decade iterating its brand of realtime strategy, following its 1997 debut *Age Of Empires* with two direct sequels, a number of expansions, and a spinoff in *Age Of Mythology* that not only pivoted this winning formula into fantasy but also its first fully 3D engine. Since Ensemble's acquisition in 2001, this path had been followed under the firm encouragement of Microsoft. Now, as the team began to look beyond *Age Of Empires 3*, it was growing restless. The RTS had been all Ensemble had ever known, and it wanted to spread its wings.

Some in the studio's leadership were keen to try their hand at an MMORPG, spurred by the wildly popular beta of *World Of Warcraft*; others suggested an action RPG in the vein of *Diablo*. Both were backed enthusiastically, but lead programmer Angelo Laudon floated a more conservative option, one that would help keep the suits upstairs happy: stick to the RTS format on which the studio had built its name, while expanding beyond the PC audience.

At the time, the most high-profile example of a console RTS was *StarCraft 64*, a clumsy port of Blizzard's PC classic that ran poorly and lacked essential features. When Ensemble's own *Age Of Empires 2* had been brought to PlayStation 2 a few years before, the port did little more than tie cursor movement to the left analogue stick and the Select button to X. "Angelo and I always felt like there were ways to pull it off that nobody was doing," *Halo Wars* producer **Chris Rippy** says. The plan, then, was to build a truly console-first RTS from the ground up, something that could live comfortably on the soon-to-launch Xbox 360.

The bulk of the studio was tasked with finishing *Age Of Empires 3* before moving on to the *Diablo* concept, another team was put onto the MMO project, and a final group – composed only of Laudon, Rippy and four others – got to work prototyping a console RTS codenamed 'Phoenix'. One of those four was **Graeme Devine**, a well-travelled designer and programmer whose credits spanned *Doom 3*



Though it was conceived as a console game, a PC version followed, and also a revamped *Definitive Edition* in 2016

and cult puzzler *The 7th Guest*. Studio leadership reckoned his talents were being wasted coding *Age Of Empires 3*, and suggested he take the reins of Phoenix's design. Relatively new to the studio, he hadn't yet burned out on the genre – and previous

"WE ALWAYS FELT THAT WE WERE A SKUNKWORKS TEAM OFF TO THE SIDE. WE NEEDED TO PROVE OURSELVES"

experience had taught him not to write off experimental console ideas. "I thought back to my time at Id, when we were just beginning *Doom 3*, and *Halo* came out for the first Xbox," he recalls. He and his colleagues dismissed the idea of a console FPS outright. "And then we played *Halo* and were like, 'Oh. Look at that. That's pretty darn playable'."

Achieving similar with Phoenix wouldn't be easy. The RTS was perhaps even more bound to PC and mouse-and-keyboard controls than the FPS before it. Rippy lists some of the questions that faced the team: "What was it like to select units? What was it like to move units? What was it like to gather resources? It was really just the most basic things." In search of answers, the team dedicated the first year of development to making a fully functional console port of *Age Of Mythology* to demonstrate that intuitive console controller

support was even possible. "We always felt, at least at the beginning, that we were a skunkworks team off to the side," Rippy says. "We needed to prove ourselves."

Tinkering with narrative, meanwhile, Devine decided that the game would step away from the historical settings – fantastical or otherwise – to which the studio had previously been tied. Phoenix would instead be a sci-fi epic that drew on *War Of The Worlds* and 2001: A Space Odyssey. "Humans go to the Moon, we find structures on the Moon, and we set off a cosmic car alarm," Devine says. An alien race called the Sway would follow the noise, triggering an invasion of Earth.

Asymmetry was key. As in *StarCraft*, the human and alien factions would sport distinct unit types, abilities, upgrade paths and playstyles. The Sway would be able to blanket sections of the map in a fog of war, while the humans relied on stealth tactics. Both would advance through technological stages – much like the eras in *Age Of Empires* – but the Sway would do so by sacrificing their own units, adding a new dimension to skirmishes. Designs changed often, and the team's small size meant it could nimbly prototype and implement new ideas. "One of Ensemble's strengths was to playtest every day," Devine says, with the rest of the studio often joining in to give pointers. Eventually, they honed Phoenix to a state where they felt it was fun to play. "That was the point where we went to Microsoft."

The publisher hadn't greenlit any of Ensemble's smaller prototypes in the past, but it liked Phoenix. Microsoft was keen to have one of its most lauded studios produce something for its new platform, and seemed impressed by what the team had produced. There was just one snag. RTS had no proven console audience, and executives worried that Phoenix would struggle to sell without attachment to a bigger brand. Ensemble could develop the prototype into a full game, Microsoft said, on the condition that it became a *Halo* spinoff.

Devine took this hard. He had spent a year building out a world of alien races, languages and future history. Now, he was being told to chuck it away for a series about which he knew little. "I balked," he says. "I balked" ►

THE MAKING OF...

badly. I did not like the idea." He was given the weekend to think about it. Then the arrangement was placed in stronger terms: if the team didn't get on board with the *Halo* pivot, there would be layoffs. "Well, OK, then," Devine reasoned at the time. "I guess I like *Halo*."

Bar the control system, which the team felt they'd just about cracked, most of the existing design work couldn't neatly map onto the *Halo* universe, making it redundant. And while Devine found a richer world in *Halo* than expected, the transition was made more complicated by the fact Ensemble was now working with another studio's IP. To start their relationship on the right foot, Devine and Rippy visited Bungie's headquarters in Seattle to demo an early build. The atmosphere was tense. Many Bungie staff seemed confused. After hesitations, Ensemble was given permission to add to the *Halo* canon – ideally in a far-off corner of the universe.

Devine remembers Bungie's pitch: "Why don't you set this 100,000 years before the events of *Halo*, in the time of the Forerunners?" Ensemble was on board, but not Microsoft: "No, we want Spartans." Except Ensemble couldn't use the one Spartan everyone knew. Master Chief – and indeed all of *Halo*'s other central characters – were off limits, as the team skirted carefully around the in-development *Halo 3* and the (ill-fated) *Halo* film. With Bungie's assistance, Devine created a new crew of UNSC soldiers that Ensemble could play with, avoiding the risk of stepping on any toes.

While *Halo Wars* was progressing, Ensemble's other projects were struggling. The MMO team had pivoted that game into another *Halo*-themed spinoff without Microsoft's request or approval. The *Diablo*-style ARPG project was cancelled when Microsoft refused to greenlight it, and the prototype that replaced it – a *Zelda*-inspired spy game called *Agent* – fared no better. The team was split up, and its staff distributed among the MMO and *Halo Wars*.

The extra hands were sorely needed. Despite being the only active project at Ensemble that had received Microsoft's approval, *Halo Wars* had the smallest team. But, as senior staff rolled off other projects, the balance of what was once a lean, nimble unit shifted. Devine was left to focus on the narrative, while lead design duties were handed over to **Dave Pottinger**. A veteran of Ensemble who'd

Q&A

Graeme Devine

Lead writer



RTS games are typically light on narrative – why did you decide to put such a big focus on the story in this instance?

That was always something that was huge to the original Phoenix. I loved making the story for *Halo Wars*, but at the same time it moved maybe too much in the cinematic direction instead of the player-involved direction. I wish we'd made it more interactive, and had some points in it where it was like *Baldur's Gate 3*, [where players] make choices.

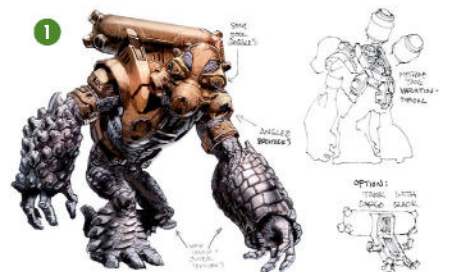
How would that have worked?

There's a vast amount of dialogue in *Halo Wars*. There's spreadsheets and spreadsheets for every character type saying, "Help me, I'm dying", so you can close your eyes and imagine what's going on. So branching dialogue would not have been a breeze, because it's never a breeze, but it would have been a nice way for the player to feel more engaged in the characters.

When this became a *Halo* game, was it a challenge to find the right story?

Oh, yeah, holy shit. I used to send blogs from the crew of the Spirit Of Fire [the game's main ship] out to the whole team. The Daily Spirit was actually something that I sent to the entire team that was working on *Halo Wars*, every single day. And it was in-character. We had Spock the cat, we had Serina loving chocolate, we had the loss of Prophecy, we even had a reporter who was accompanying the Spirit Of Fire on the way to Harvest who didn't know if his family was alive. It was to keep people in canon. You get the whole team in canon, then things will be more *Halo*. And then the story itself spun out of those characters that I wrote about in the Daily Spirit.

worked across all of the studio's releases, he immediately spotted problems: "The simulation was floundering, the pathfinding was pretty awful, and the computer-player AI was non-existent." Many of the system improvements the studio had developed for *Age Of Empires 3* hadn't been brought over to *Halo Wars*, while many of the design ideas borrowed from that series proved unworkable on console. "The complexity of the game was difficult for console players," Pottinger says. "When I took over as lead designer, we were sending builds out



- 1 Covenant Grunt variants, with different backpack styles.
- 2 Designs for Spirit Of Fire crew member Professor Ellen Anders.
- 3 An early render of a UNSC Supply Pad, created before buildings were made part of prefabricated structures.
- 4 Brute Chopper concept art.
- 5 The Flood arrive as an NPC faction midway into the campaign.
- 6 The Spirit Of Fire bridge was originally set to be a full 3D space.
- 7 Warthogs could jump across chasms in early builds. The idea was scrapped by release in favour of ramming enemy units head-on





THE MAKING OF...

and people were playing them and they weren't having fun, because it was just too hard." Soldiers differentiated only by their weapons might work in a medieval setting but they looked confusingly similar in the world of *Halo*; selecting individual units from the hundreds on screen was a pain using analogue sticks; and managing an economy and building a base bogged down the momentum of skirmishes.

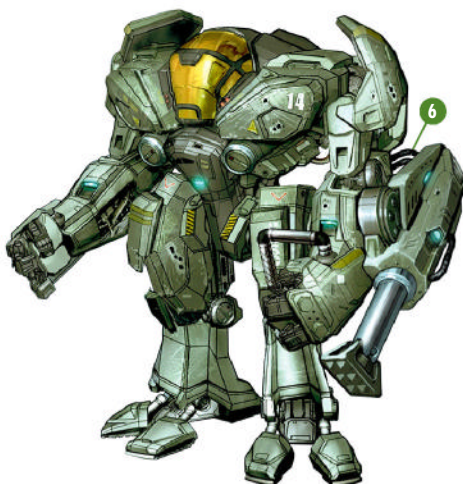
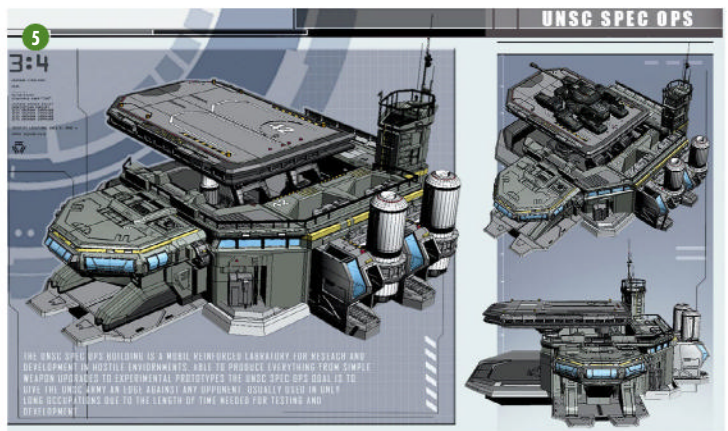
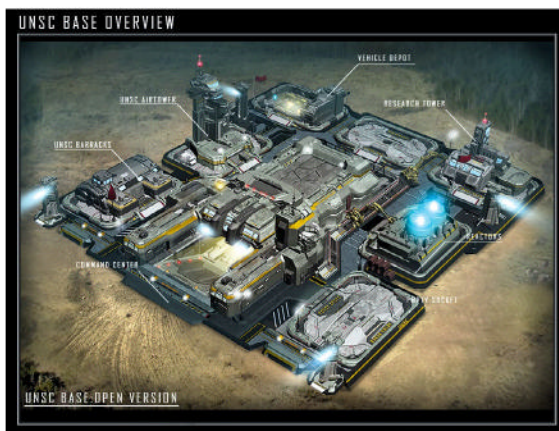
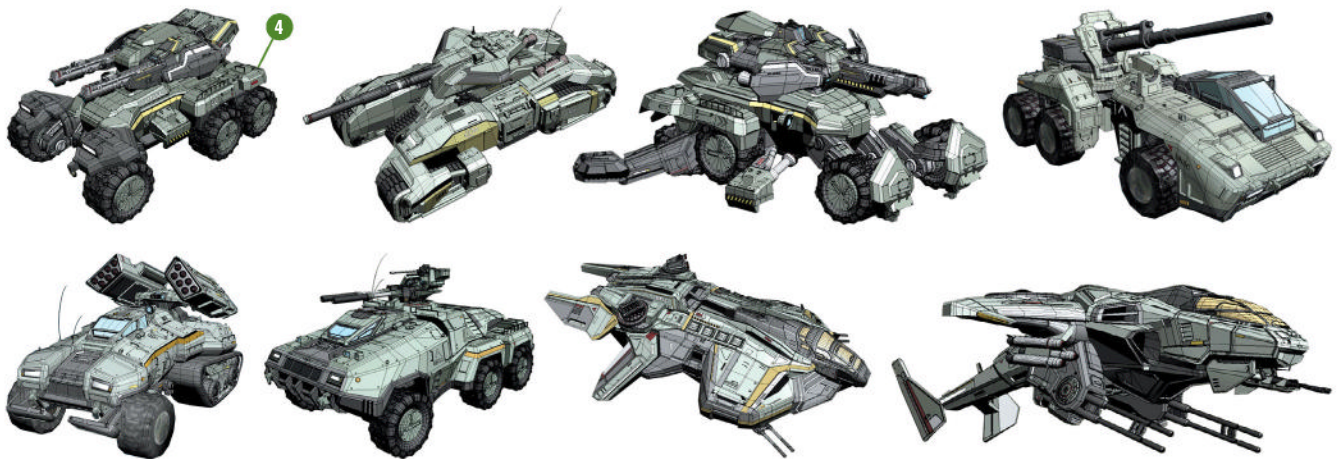
Under Pottinger, the game was streamlined. The economy was changed to a two-resource system that didn't involve individual gatherer units; freestyle base-building was pared down to a preset building system; and a Select All option was added so that players could instantly control their entire force. Difficulties remained, though. *Halo Wars* was now a console game, an RTS and the next entry in Microsoft's biggest game series. But which was it *first*? "We had a lot of internal debate, really right up until the end, about the priority of those things," Pottinger remembers. "In my view, it was: *Halo*, console, RTS. Once you decide to make a *Halo* game, you have to deliver a *Halo* game."

No wonder, then, that the Spartans were put front and centre, given the ability to hijack Covenant vehicles, and made an essential part of the UNSC roster. In some ways, though, this was anathema to Ensemble's RTS principles, limiting players' strategic options by encouraging them to rely on a specific unit. But finding a balance between compelling and console-friendly design was always the challenge. "We had to pull back on some depth, and, honestly, we pulled back too much," Pottinger says. "Then we ran out of time to put the right amount of depth in. I think about *Halo Wars* as a lot of missed opportunities."

Yet when the game finally launched, those missed opportunities weren't as clear to players as its makers. *Halo Wars* was popular enough to get a sequel – albeit not within the same studio. With the MMO project cancelled several months earlier, Microsoft announced ahead of *Halo Wars'* release that this would be the studio's final game. Ensemble, then, spent its last days working in the very genre its leadership had once been desperate to escape. It made sure, at least, to go out with a bang. "A lot of people thought about *Halo Wars* not necessarily just as a footnote to Microsoft," Devine says, "but as what Ensemble can do when we're at our best. And it was Ensemble at its best." ■



- 1 The Arbiter serves as the game's main villain, although he's a touch more theatrical than in other series instalments. "Our Arbiter was over-the-top crazy," Devine says. "Pantomime, almost."
- 2 Levels were originally home to friendly ambient life including arctic hounds running across the tundra.
- 3 The planet of Arcadia was created for *Halo Wars*. To convince Bungie to let Ensemble add it, Devine mocked up a spoof tourist leaflet advertising the planet.
- 4 UNSC vehicle and ship models.
- 5 The UNSC Spec Ops building was cut from the published game.
- 6 Concept art for an exoskeleton unit that was eventually discarded.
- 7 The UNSC and Covenant can activate special abilities such as this orbital laser, operating much like God Powers in *Age Of Mythology*





STUDIO PROFILE

FOOL'S THEORY

How a studio in Poland's secluded south caught the eyes of Larian, 11 Bit and CD Projekt Red

By JEREMY PEEL



Founded 2015

Employees 80

Key staff Jakub Rokosz (CEO, project lead), Krzysztof Maka (art director), Karolina Kuzia-Rokosz (design director)

URL www.foolstheory.com

Selected softography *Seven: The Days Long Gone*, *The Thaumaturge*

Current projects *The Witcher Remake*



Jakub Rokosz (project lead), Karolina Kuzia-Rokosz (design director), Anna Mąka (COO), and Krzysztof Mąka (art director)

During the half-decade he worked at CD Projekt Red, **Jakub Rokosz** rose to the rank of senior quest designer and contributed to Geralt's two most beloved adventures, *Assassins Of Kings* and *Wild Hunt*. Yet he couldn't shake the sense that he'd arrived late. "It always bothered me that I missed the first [*Witcher* game]," he says. "I wanted a chance to give it the justice it deserved."

Several years later – and by then the CEO of his own studio – Rokosz met with a few former colleagues to reminisce about the fun they'd had developing *The Witcher 3*. And just a few weeks after that, CDPR studio head Adam Badowski called with a proposal: that Rokosz and his team tackle the remake of the very first *Witcher* game. The one he hadn't managed to put his stamp on.

Rokosz calls it serendipity, and there's a certain amount of romance in the telling of his story. Yet he's clear-eyed about the task ahead. "First and foremost, we need an honest, down-to-earth analysis of which parts are simply bad, outdated, or unnecessarily convoluted and need to be remade," he says. "While at the same time highlighting the parts that are great, should be retained, or are direct key pillars that can't be discarded." After that, Fool's Theory can begin the redesign process: "This involves removing the bad parts and rearranging the good ones to create something that is both satisfying and still resonates with the feel of the original."

Game development is as much about throwing work away as it is creating something new. That's a lesson Rokosz learned early, alongside Fool's Theory co-founder and art director Krzysztof Maka, when they both contributed to a forum-run project named *Bourgeoisie*. Initially a post-nuclear isometric RPG made by *Fallout* fans, it was boiled down over time to a survival horror game – which secured funding and was released in 2011 as *Afterfall: Insanity*. "This served as my first real lesson in project scope," Rokosz says.

Some of that team clung onto the dream of making an old-school RPG, however. And so, after careers made in Warsaw at the likes of CDPR and Flying Wild Hog, they reunited in Rokosz's hometown of Bielsko-Biala to found a new studio, with friends gathered along the way. "We were tired of the big-city life and the ridiculous hours spent in traffic commuting," Rokosz says. The pace of life in Bielsko-Biala couldn't be more different: nestled among the forested Beskid mountains of southern Poland, the city's population is an order of magnitude smaller than that of the capital.

It was here, working as a team of five, that Fool's Theory conceived *Seven: The Days Long Gone*. Like *Bourgeoisie* before it, this was a postapocalyptic world explored from an isometric perspective, drawn from Rokosz's "obsession with systemic game design and the freedom of choice the *Fallout* series offers". It was made possible by a partnership with publisher IMG.N.PRO, whose staff could make up the numbers Fool's Theory was lacking. "As luck would have it," Rokosz says, "developers working in that department were my childhood friends with whom I had always wanted

"TO MAKE THE GAME OF YOUR DREAMS, WITH CHILDHOOD FRIENDS, IN YOUR HOMETOWN? WHO WOULDN'T AGREE?"

to create a game." More serendipity. "To be able to make the game of your dreams, with childhood friends, in your hometown? Who wouldn't agree?"

Seven was, by Rokosz's admission, "my ugly mashup child of fantasy, sci-fi and cyberpunk inspirations, with its story primarily serving as a backdrop for the game's systems". Immersive-sim-style stealth rubbed up against rooftop parkour and an impudent thief who shares his head with a disapproving AI. Players could unlock fast travel across its open world by hacking its transit system. Not every element shone, but against the odds, it all came together – a game without any obvious genre-mate, at least until *Weird West* rode into town four years later. "Seven was a fantastically chaotic project in some respects," Rokosz says. "But we love it all the same, and fans continue to appreciate it to this day."

While not exactly a commercial success, *Seven* put Fool's Theory on the radar of likeminded studios with deeper pockets. It's easy to see the philosophical crossover with fellow systemic obsessive Larian Studios, which tasked Fool's

Theory with developing free DLC for *Divinity: Original Sin 2* and fleshing out *Baldur's Gate 3*'s programming features. The former task proved tricky, given that Larian left very little real estate in Rivellon unpopulated by sidestories or combat encounters. Fool's Theory wove its work masterfully into the existing game, however: playing its quests during the course of *Divinity's* campaign, you might never realise they were squeezed in after the fact. "Having the opportunity to learn about the business from [Larian's] Swen Vincke was an eye-opening experience," Rokosz says.

Seven also caught the attention of 11 Bit Studios, the Polish powerhouse behind *This War Of Mine*, *Frostpunk* and recent **Edge** cover game *The Alters*. The success of its harrowing survival

management sims allowed 11 Bit to invest in local talent as a publisher, and led to the signing of Fool's Theory's next game, *The Thaumaturge*, a post-Disco *Elysium* RPG set in a supernaturally tinged, turn-of-the-century version of the very town these developers were escaping: Warsaw.

Since then, 11 Bit has doubled down on its investment, acquiring 40 per cent of Fool's Theory's shares and helping the studio "transition from our wild indie days and workflows into a properly managed company". This stability has enabled Fool's Theory to grow to 80 employees while retaining its creative freedom. "The *Thaumaturge* is *Seven's* older, wiser and more articulate sibling," Rokosz says. "The narrative is much more mature. The characters are better developed."

Where *Seven* pulled from the medieval sci-fi of authors like Mark Lawrence and Scott Lynch, *The Thaumaturge* is rooted in real events in Polish history, and the literature of the early 20th century. Design director **Karolina Kuzia-Rokosz** and her team conducted extensive research, which in turn informed the game's world of Russian soldiers, ►

STUDIO PROFILE



For its remake, Fool's Theory is rebuilding *The Witcher* from scratch in Unreal Engine 5. The studio has also contributed to breakout Polish projects including *Gord* and *Outriders*. For the latter, it provided People Can Fly with level design, meshing and programming support

Jewish merchants, Polish townspeople, and unearthly demons tied to human hosts.

Kuzia-Rokosz identifies overlapping themes with *Seven*. "We enjoy witty humour and cheeky ruffians," she says. "Our stories often revolve around morally ambiguous choices, internal conflict and the essence of what makes us human." It's perhaps telling that every Fool's Theory game features a party, the perfect way of exploring the human capacity for both wit and conflict in one place. "Nothing is ever simply black or white," Kuzia-Rokosz says. "The imperfections of human characters are what drive us to tell complex stories, allowing players to relate to them in one way or another, and to hope that each story could be a lesson of sorts." And indeed, parties aside, *The Thaumaturge* is a darker tale than *Seven*, and one that, despite presenting you with a fixed protagonist in Wiktor Szulski, leaves room to define his character with your own decisions.

Between projects such as *The Thaumaturge* and Slavic city-builder *Gord*, there's been a clear shift in Polish games towards celebrating the country's past and folklore. And why not? *The Witcher* has created a huge international appetite for knotty, morally ambiguous stories inspired by Poland's background as an occupied state, as well as the eerie magic of its legends.

For Fool's Theory, that shift represents an opportunity to escape the usual trappings of high fantasy, with its winged wyrms and knights in armour. "There's nothing inherently wrong with generic dragons, but we always strive to create content that reflects and builds upon our own experiences and the environment we live in," Rokosz says. Naturally, then, they turned to the superstitions of their homeland, and to its tumultuous history, "because those elements ultimately shaped us into the developers we are today." It helps, we imagine, that Fool's Theory

works in close proximity to Poland's past, working out of the same 19th-century building in Bielsko-Biala's centre where the studio started out. "The only change," Rokosz says, "is that we moved down one level from the attic where we began."

Rokosz still talks wistfully about the "garage days" of Polish game development, before open engines and online tutorials, when tools and knowledge were hard to come by. "You either learned to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges, or you shifted to a different profession," he says. "To be honest, we're not alone in this mindset. It's a common trait among many Polish game developers who began their careers at around the same time." Many of the friends that

Badowski announced the studio's involvement in 2022, with considerable fanfare and not a little pressure: "They know the source material well, they know how much gamers have been looking forward to seeing the remake happen, and they know how to make incredible and ambitious games. And although it will take some time before we're ready to share more about and from the game, I know it'll be worth the wait."

Rokosz sees the project as another step in his studio's growth. "Naturally," he says, "we need to scale up, in terms of team size and technological capabilities." Fool's Theory plans to expand over the next few years and bring its headcount to 140, a figure representing new seats in both the

"WE DON'T REQUIRE ANYONE TO RELOCATE, ALTHOUGH WE RECOMMEND IT. OUR MOUNTAINS ARE AWESOME"

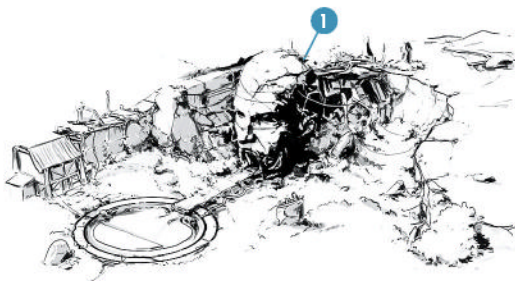
Fool's Theory's founders met working on *Afterfall*, or crossed paths with during the years afterwards, now run their own companies – or are responsible for the hit productions for which the Polish industry has become known. "I guess we learned quite early in our careers that with sufficient preparation and self-confidence, great things are achievable."

Rokosz points to *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov, along with Shigeru Miyamoto and John Carmack – pioneers who had no established roads to follow. "In that regard, we're just toddlers standing on the shoulders of these giants," he says. "When you consider what our predecessors achieved, you realise that the problem isn't ambition, it's a lack of proper preparation."

Now, as Fool's Theory wraps up work on *The Thaumaturge* and turns its attention to *The Witcher Remake*, preparation is front of mind. CDPR's

studio's development departments and its back office. While Rokosz doesn't foresee a return to Warsaw, he admits that the "secluded setting" of Bielsko-Biala initially posed a recruitment challenge. This has been solved, in part, by the shift in developer mentalities brought on by the pandemic, and the studio's adoption of remote working. ("We don't require anyone to relocate," Rokosz says. "Although we highly recommend it. Our mountains are awesome.")

The challenge now for Fool's Theory will be not just to live up to the expectations of *Witcher* fans, but to do so while retaining the voice that gained the ear of its peers in the first place. Which are, we might suggest, the same qualities that powered *Seven*'s protagonist, Teriel: an audacious ambition, offset by a cheeky grin and a winning ability to punch above their weight. ■



- 1 From *Seven* onwards, Fool's Theory has displayed an architectural ambition throughout its level design.
- 2 As a thief set loose on a prison island, Teriel is uniquely suited to navigating *Seven*'s social and stealth challenges.
- 3 In *The Thaumaturge*'s early-20th-century Warsaw, crime and luxury are seen as two sides of the same coin.
- 4 The Thaumaturges are the only people who can perceive and control Salutors, beings tied to specific human bloodlines



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING/ NEAR MISSES

The Last Of Us Part II Remastered PS5

Having cancelled its live-service multiplayer game, Naughty Dog has now released just one new game in the past seven years: this one. Which partly explains why it's returning to the well just three-and-a-half years later. As a cutting-edge late-era PS4 game, it hardly screamed for a visual upgrade – certainly, the average player would struggle to detect much difference in presentation. But there are worthwhile additions. Three playable deleted scenes are present in their pre-alpha form, with commentary from designers offering insight into the challenges of high-end game development. The major draw for most, however, will be Roguelike mode No Return. Here you're asked to survive a string of short encounters set in repurposed campaign environments, restocking and upgrading between them, and steadily unlocking new characters with distinct perks: Joel is sturdier than Ellie, for instance, but can't duck incoming blows. Challenging and intense – with just one life, the stakes are even higher – it serves as a stress test for the game's combat systems, which pass with flying colours. Shorn of the original narrative context that wanted you to be horrified by your own brutality, though, the death rattles and charred corpses feel especially stomach-turning. And in the context of current world events, it's hard not to recall the nucleus of the idea of 'universal hate' that birthed it. For all the game's qualities, playing it now can leave an unexpectedly sour aftertaste.

The Cub PS5

Demagog Studio isn't the first developer to explore a single setting across multiple games, but the idea of a shared universe remains a fascinating one. As in *Golf Club Nostalgia* and prequel of sorts *Highwater*, this cinematic side-scroller is set on Earth following an ecological disaster. Wistful for their former home, those who settled on Mars after the catastrophe return to find a feral child raised by wolves. You play as the boy-cub, scampering across ruined environs as your pursuers take aim with stun guns and proximity traps. A modern take on Mega Drive-era platformers, its trial-and-error mechanics are compounded by imprecise controls that are never quite as responsive as you'd hope. But the offbeat tone is appealing: radio broadcasts and music tracks add flavour to the fiction, as do the various collectables, which range from newspapers to USB drives and foodstuffs that make you burp.



Explore the iPad edition of *Edge* for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

94 The Finals

PC, PS5, Xbox Series

98 Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

PC, PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series

100 Asgard's Wrath 2

Quest 2, 3, Pro

102 Another Code: Recollection

Switch

104 Go Mecha Ball

PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series

106 Home Safety Hotline

PC

107 Raindrop Sprinters

PC, Switch

Immersive sins

One of the great lies of the videogame industry is that better graphics automatically make for more engaging games. Certainly whenever a console maker is unveiling new hardware, we hear the same old lines about how extra technological horsepower leads to increased immersion, as a way to encourage us to put our hands in our pockets. We're not sure it qualifies as conventional wisdom, since it's patently nonsense: think of all the games that have striven for photorealism over the years and how badly many of them have aged since.

Rather, the secret to creating an enveloping world is consistency and cohesiveness of vision. Take *Home Safety Hotline*, which transports us 30 years back in time, via an interface that expertly mimics that of a mid-'90s PC. From the greenish tinge of its monitor to the pixellated imagery on the desktop, the network outages, sluggish loading and noisy clunks and clicks, we're made to feel that a call centre for cryptid intruders could have been a real workplace long ago.

The stylised look of *Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown* is similarly no obstacle to engagement; we're positively hypnotised by the lithe, acrobatic movement of this rebooted royal. Nor do we find ourselves in any way hindered by the gaudy colours and top-down camera as we whizz around in *Go Mecha Ball*.

As for the crisp, glossy surrounds of *The Finals*, they're perfectly suited to the player-generated chaos occurring within them; any busier and the frantic action would be hard to read. In that sense, it should age well. What won't, however, are its text-to-speech AI commentators, a cost-cutting exercise that cheapens it significantly. Not enough to spoil the fun, but certainly enough to take the shine off an otherwise absorbing shooter – and a reminder that while there may be lots of money sloshing around the game industry, it's easy to see it invested in the wrong places.



The Finals

The thief sets down an auto-turret, a strobing protective eye cast over her partners-in-crime and their precious loot extractor, dinging like a slot machine about to pay out — yet it fails to catch the cloaked swordsman who drops out of invisibility just in time to swing at the thief's head. A hulking body leaps into the air then drops into a ground-pound, tearing through multiple storeys of a building and the skull of an unfortunate soul on the ground floor. Three squadmates cower in the ruins of a tower block, sheltering from the UFOs that loom overhead, raining down fat green blocks of explosive energy.

Almost every moment of *The Finals* feels like an action set-piece lifted from a slightly different genre. Breaching charges and meteor showers, sledgehammers and grappling hooks, goo grenades and orbital lasers — these don't seem like weapons that should co-exist within one game. Yet here, you might encounter them all within the same match. Even more remarkably, it works.

At least, it does once you've adjusted to how overwhelming it can all be. *The Finals*' onramp consists of a brief tutorial that skips past the many tools at your disposal to lay out the basic rules of the game. Essentially: get to a marked Vault, open it to release a Cash Box, carry that to a Cashout Station and defend it while the timer ticks down — or interrupt the countdown of a rival team's Station to steal its payload for your own. As an objective, it's simple to grasp while rewarding strategic team play and keeping the lines of battle fluid, as defenders become attackers and vice versa. With that established, you're dropped into the fray, and realise how much more chaotic this is in practice.

Combatants come in three forms (Light, Medium, Heavy) but even the bulkiest can strafe and mantle with remarkable sprightliness. Light characters are naturally quicker, and petite in a way that reminds us of decades-old arguments over the use of monkeys in *Timesplitters'* multiplayer. Factor in the breadth of arsenal and destructible environments, and fights can become a deluge of information. Which might help explain *The Finals*' visual style — or, rather, the lack thereof.

Contestants are kitted out in bland, Squid Game-style tracksuits, while the locations on the game's apparently globe-spanning map all feature the same faintly futuristic urban architecture, the same clean lines and glossy surfaces. Anodyne as it is, it's this way by design: to accommodate all the fictions and mechanics being mashed up here, to leave room for the more flamboyant cosmetics that provide *The Finals*' main revenue stream, and to avoid any visual clutter beyond that which players create themselves.

It's harder to assign any such intent to the game's lacklustre fiction. Not a primary concern, perhaps, in an online shooter, but *The Finals* insists on reminding you of

Developer/publisher Embark Studios
Format PC (tested), PS5 (tested),
Xbox Series
Release Out now

It's perfectly simple to grasp while rewarding strategic team play and keeping the lines of battle fluid



FLIP OF THE COIN

We've focused on *The Finals*' main mode, Quick Cash, but there is another. Bank It is essentially a revival of *Halo: Reach*'s Headhunter, but killed players drop coins rather than skulls. These must be banked to score them, painting a target on the back of any player who stuffs their pockets. In theory, well-stocked players would escape under their teammates' protection, but with the varying speeds of each class (and our disinclination to activate voice comms), squads often split into lone wolves. And when all four teams pile in, the readability of combat gets pushed to breaking point. There's a reason, it seems, that the *other* mode is the one used for tournament play.

its Running Man-like premise at every opportunity via two commentators, their voices generated with text-to-speech AI. This seems to be a money-saving decision rather than a way of opening up fresh possibilities with, say, dynamic callouts. As you hear the same few looping soundbites (which may as well have been scripted by a machine), *The Finals* presents a robust argument against AI's expansion throughout game development, not only on an ethical basis but an aesthetic one, too.

Yet in the moment, as explosive canisters are launched overarm, grenades fly and a Light player pulls off a perfect ninja-rope slingshot to evade the Heavy rhino-charging through walls, we have to admit that such concerns are rarely front of mind. After a hundred matches, *The Finals* is still showing us new things, thanks to the ingenuity of players and the breadth of tools at their disposal. The loadouts of its three basic characters can be remixed into just about any shooter archetype you can think of. The Heavy can be given a hammer and energy shield to become an ersatz Reinhardt, for example, or paired with a Healing Beam-equipped Medium to recreate *TF2*'s finest romance. You might have noticed our attention focusing on the weightier end of *The Finals*' spectrum, and it's true that the Heavy presents the most attractive option in the game's opening weeks. Yet the balance is never tipped overwhelmingly towards one particular build: there are plenty of Lights and Mediums ready to demonstrate what we're missing out on.

An ideal squad will be some mix of the above. Indeed, identifying gaps or potential synergies in your roster of three can be as essential as pulling the trigger at the right moment — as can knowing when to rush a Cashout and when to pull back and revive a teammate. If we encounter our fair share of players who disagree, choosing an endless K:D meat grinder over playing the objective, then things are at least a little brighter in tournament mode. Once it unlocks, after a couple of dozen matches, this feels like *The Finals* in its truest form.

The knockout round structure allows team dynamics to develop over time, and rivalries too. More important still are its rule tweaks: switching from one objective to two, introducing a slow trickle of points that lead up to a big final payout, a limited supply of respawn tickets, and a percentage penalty for a full squad wipe. These complicate the decision-making behind each encounter. As satisfying as it is to leap off the tip of a crane, taking potshots at a rival team as you fall, or to peel off the side of a building with a well-aimed rocket, these moments are all the sweeter for knowing you've allowed a Cash Box-carrying teammate to slip past unnoticed, or opened a gap in the defences around an enemy's dinging Cashout Station. *The Finals* offers plenty of sound and fury, but what makes it worth coming back to is what all that signifies.



ABOVE The tracksuits every player starts out in feel like conspicuous winks to *Squid Game*, as do the polyhedral masks available in the game's shop. It's all neatly in line with *The Finals*' framing as a kind of lethal gameshow



MAIN The breadth of weapons and gadgets that can be unlocked using in-game currency – such as this flamethrower – aren't necessarily better than your starters, and more about a different way of playing. **ABOVE** There's a touch of *Smash Bros*' game-upending Assist Trophies to the randomised Events that can turn up in any match, from low gravity to alien invasions and orbital lasers that will strike down anyone who stands still too long. **LEFT** Much of *The Finals*' action plays out on rooftops that are linked via ziplines and jump-pad launchers that provide multiple routes between their structures

Post Script

The Finals reawakens an appetite for destruction

Levels, stages, maps: we have many ways of referring to the virtual spaces presented by videogames, each term loaded with connotations. Often, though, it feels like we might as well just borrow from the vocabulary of theatre and cinema, and call them ‘sets’: backdrops designed to support the story and bolster its illusion of reality, but not to be prodded at or even seen from any angle other than those chosen by the cinematographer or set designer. There are good practical and aesthetic reasons why technological advances might have prioritised visual fidelity over reactivity. Yet, on the occasions when we are presented with worlds that we can mould and reshape using our own hands, we can’t help but wonder if something might have been lost here.

There’s the simple power-fantasy aspect, of course. All that buckling architecture and flying masonry makes *The Finals*’ action immediately exciting, and lends extra heft to every weapon, their fire not only able to eliminate rival players but punch holes in the scenery. It’s something the developers at Embark Studios have had in their sights since their days at *Battlefield* studio DICE. Indeed, many of the dynamic environmental features once touted as ‘Levolution’ in that series are on show here: buttons that raise bollards or lower blast doors; pressurised containers that throw up clouds of obscuring smoke when shot; shifts in weather and time of day that alter the rules of engagement. These small touches might lack the flashiness of the game’s more destructive tendencies, but they get at the real opportunity of reactive levels: as a game design tool.

Think of the endlessly breakable and rebuildable worlds of *Minecraft*, or how *Teardown* reimagines them into a design-your-own-speedrun heist game – examples where this is used as the primary material of a game’s design. But more often it plays a supplementary role, adding a fresh layer of strategy to a more traditional combat design. You can trace this all the way back to *Space Invaders*, with its shields that disintegrate, pixel by pixel, in a fashion that manages to suggest the texture of concrete. Vitally, they are chipped away not only by enemy fire but the player’s, too, birthing one of the medium’s first cheeses as canny players learned to create tunnels for sniping through.

Jumping forward in time, destruction is likewise at the heart of *Spelunky*’s risk-reward decisions. Encountering a cluster of enemies and traps that looks particularly nasty, knowing that one slip-up could send you right back to the start, you’re likely to glance up to your current bomb count to see if you can spare one or two simply to circumvent the situation entirely. Similarly, coming up against a pod of aliens holed up in one of *XCOM*’s petrol stations or convenience stores,

you might bring forward your rocket-toting Heavy to strip away the cover entirely, opening a new flank for their squadmates to exploit.

In *The Finals*, you’re making these kinds of decisions constantly, under gunfire. Take that explosive canister you’ve just picked up: should you lob it towards a rival player, knowing that a direct hit will score you a kill, or at a nearby wall, punching a bespoke shortcut towards your objective so you need never cross their path? Almost every tool in *The Finals*’ arsenal is similarly flexible in its utility, in a way we associate more with immersive sims than online shooters – something underlined by the presence of goo grenades lifted straight from Arkane’s *Prey*. (The theft is easily forgiven; mostly we’re just relieved to see that Creative Assembly wasn’t the only developer to have the idea of bringing this gadget into the multiplayer arena, particularly given Sega’s cancellation of *Hyenas* late last year.) Their insulation-foam contents can be used to form a temporary protective barrier, buying you just enough time to revive a teammate, or to block off a doorway from attackers (though, of course, your rivals might just create their own means of ingress), or to replace a blown-out staircase, or as a flammable deterrent, or to immobilise an enemy, or...

These decisions most often cluster around a Cashout Station, in that agonising wait for its contents to be emptied and scored out, as the current occupiers build up a variety of defences: turrets, barricades, mines, walls of goo. It’s a process akin to the opening stages of a *Rainbow Six Siege* match (surely an inspiration here, as the one other multiplayer shooter of note that has taken advantage of destructible environments), except played at triple speed. Fortifications go up, are blown through and are rebuilt by a new set of defenders, often all in the space of a single minute. And brilliantly, unlike in *Siege*, destruction can be just as much a defensive tool as construction: a Cashout Station can be protected with a timely breaching charge that blows out the floor from beneath it, putting it safely beyond the reach of any would-be thief by a storey or two.

While it is, naturally, unreasonable to expect this kind of environmental reactivity from every game, we’ll admit to needing a slight readjustment period when going back to worlds that are more film set than Lego set. Most videogames focus their interactions on other sentient beings, whether they’re player- or computer-controlled. But after a long stretch playing *The Finals*, or *Teardown*, or even *Minecraft*, it’s hard not to wonder if we should be treating our surroundings within games – the levels, the stages, the maps – as something to be played with, as much as their inhabitants. ■

Many of the dynamic environmental features once touted as ‘Levolution’ in that series are on show here



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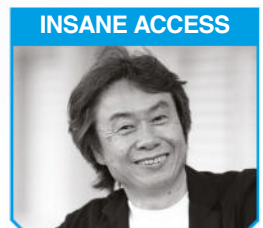
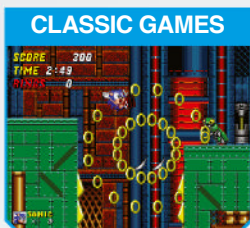


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Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

With any series that has made the leap from two to three dimensions, a reversion to the former usually suggests a conservative throwback. *Super Mario Bros. Wonder* bucked that trend, and now the same can be said for *The Lost Crown*. Neither a return to the unforgiving side-scrolling platforming and swordplay of Jordan Mechner's original nor concerned with the past as per the troubled *Sands Of Time* remake, it instead reinvents *Prince Of Persia* as a Metroidvania. The series might have been missing in action for more than a decade (not counting a cynical licensed mobile runner), but here is an instalment that finds itself on an assured footing, with a contemporary feel to match new protagonist Sargon's hairstyle.

Despite its contentious announcement last summer, Ubisoft Montpellier's vision may be the most authentically Persian the series has been. From the setting of the mythical Mount Qaf downwards, it's rooted in ancient Persian history and folklore, while the score features Sufi-inspired singer Mentrax as one of its composers, and there's even an option to play the game with a Persian language track. That its leading man has taken different forms over the years means Sargon's origins should be a moot point, but it's made clear early on that he is neither of royal nor necessarily Persian lineage; rather, he belongs to an elite group of soldiers called The Immortals, who have been charged with protecting the Persian Crown. Indeed, no sooner have you quelled the former in the tutorial than the latter emerges. This time, it's the prince who needs *rescuing*.

This is not, however, an ensemble adventure; let's just say your fellow Immortals haven't been designed with such distinctive physiques and weapons merely to serve as tutors or quest givers. Rest assured that Sargon largely sticks to tradition, fighting and moving with the sprightliness of his predecessors. Ranged attacks are available via a bow and chakram, which double for clearing hazards or pressing out-of-reach switches, but twin blades Qays and Layla serve as his best allies in both offence and defence. Combos are simple to mash out but applying the directional stick or holding the attack button sees you launching enemies into the air, ending combos with a powerful strike or making a dive attack from above, and you'll unlock even more ways to keep your foes airborne. You're encouraged to string together combos and get in parries, since these fill a gauge that allows Sargon to unleash Athra Surges, powerful abilities that can turn the tide of battle. Given your limited stock of potions, it helps that the second of these you unlock is the ability to regenerate health.

Further bonuses and abilities are granted by equipping amulets, one of several leaves taken from *Hollow Knight*'s book. Another is an NPC who sells you a map of the area you're in, provided you can find their location. That one of the amulets is essentially a poor

Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montpellier)
Format PC, PS4, PS5 (tested), Switch, Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

From the setting of the mythical Mount Qaf downwards, it's rooted in ancient Persian history and folklore



VISUAL AIDS

While *The Lost Crown* has a wealth of accessibility settings that can be toggled on and off at any time, such as a high-contrast mode and portals that let you skip platforming sections on the critical path, the most intriguing features help with exploration. In Guided mode, the map provides extra markers, displaying the next objective while also highlighting paths that are available (green) or blocked (red), thus saving you from wandering down cul-de-sacs. And if you've ever taken screenshots for reference when stuck, Memory Shards are in-game mechanics that instantly create screenshots and even display them on the map – a convenient way to recall the exact obstacles in an area, and to which you can return once you have the necessary ability.

man's Witch Time may be disappointing for a series associated with time-based powers, although it's arguably only time itself that has been the recurring theme since the first game's strict time limit. Here, the theme is expressed instead through a story that has its share of alternate timelines and temporal paradoxes, as well as time crystals for making purchases and upgrades (here, time is money in a very literal sense).

The new abilities Sargon acquires from the feathers of the Simurgh, a bird-like creature of Persian myth, manipulate not time but space, and are the richer for it. They're a mixture of familiar and unconventional tools that, used in tandem, provide solutions to traversing Mount Qaf's labyrinthine paths. For instance, as well as wall jumping Sargon can air dash, combining the two to climb up a wall. When we come across a blocked path that evidently needs an explosive power to clear, what we get instead is a tool that offers more devious functions. A particular highlight is the ability to create a shadow mark to which Sargon can teleport back with a tap of the left bumper. That might seem a basic way to retreat, but in a room with moving traps, it essentially allows you to shift to places that would have been impossible to reach any other way. Rewinding and freezing time feels almost quaint by comparison.

Putting your skills to the test almost immediately, the treacherous environments, while in keeping with the series' attachment to deadly spike traps, sometimes recall the madcap layout of a *Super Meat Boy* level, while some of its most devious platforming puzzles test memory as much as precision. Bosses, from human opponents to large beasts, demand mastery of your full moveset as well as careful pattern recognition, even if some of their late phases can be too frenetic to parse – we scrape through a few encounters by the skin of our teeth. These challenges are tempered by generous design, with regular checkpoints ensuring we seldom have to backtrack far to where we met our demise, while contact with lethal spikes leads not to instant impalement but a quick fade to black before you can try again from the last safe spot, a sliver of lost health the only penalty.

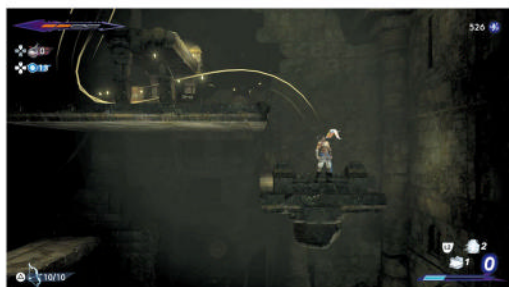
It might seem regrettable that a series so famous for depicting the brutal deaths of its protagonist should resort to rote videogame conventions such as respawns and Game Over screens (Sargon's death animation bears an uncanny resemblance to Samus Aran's). But it's a small concession to make when the upshot is a quicker return to the action. And if our new leading man is a more serious sort than his wisecracking predecessors, a similar playfulness emerges in the way you can flamboyantly pull off death-defying manoeuvres. All of which makes *The Lost Crown* the most satisfying effort from Ubisoft Montpellier since *Rayman Legends*. In a rebirth of this calibre, death is a moot point.



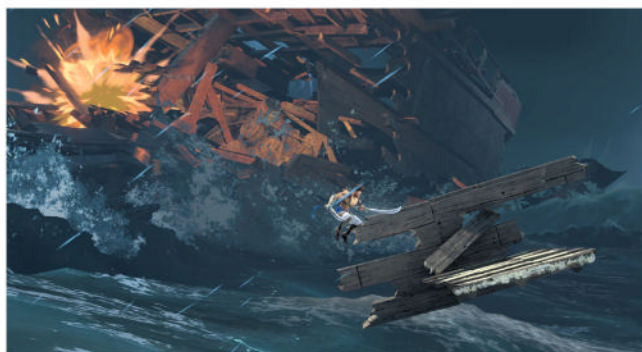
ABOVE A hint of yellow telegraphs an incoming attack, which when parried leads to a cinematic counter on a par with *Street Fighter 6*'s Critical Arts. Failure to avoid or parry such an attack from a boss results in a cinematic with you on the devastating receiving end.

LEFT While it's a shame that *The Lost Crown* doesn't employ *Rayman Legends*' UbiArt Framework, the hand-drawn portraits shine during sequences featuring dialogue.

BELOW Mount Qaf features diverse locations often defying reason – a more linear section that has you traversing a ship in the midst of an ocean frozen in time is a highlight



ABOVE Checkpoints give off an ethereal light compared to other areas. Exploring perilous environments becomes a little less unnerving when you know that a sanctuary is close by, and you won't lose your progress



Asgard's Wrath 2

Gods have taken many forms over the millennia: animal-headed, many-limbed, indistinguishable from one of us. *Asgard's Wrath 2* depicts them as simply massive. So as Thoth paces his observatory, a walking skyscraper lost in thought, each footstep rattles like thunder. He might be the Egyptian god of communication, but he's not a great listener – to get his attention we need to reach eye level, scaling the rings of a tabletop astrolabe. Before we can even begin our climb, though, one colossal sandal comes down, its shadow filling the headset's field of view. *Splat*.

Occasionally, a metaphor is too big to ignore. The towering god of communication could stand in for Meta, which acquired *Asgard's Wrath* studio Sanzaru in 2020 to lend its VR hardware some firstparty punch. Or perhaps this sequel – arriving a couple of months after *Quest 3*, as the closest thing it has to a big launch title – is the giant here. It's certainly fixated on scale, promising to keep you busy for a hundred hours or more, almost unprecedented for a single continuous campaign in VR.

Along the way, Sanzaru crams in a lot. There are dozens of weapons with alternative functions, multiple playable characters, companions who can turn into animal mounts, an open world (of sorts – see 'Sandbox') peppered with dungeons, set-piece boss encounters, parkour traversal that avoids motion-sickness pitfalls, RPG skill trees, upgradeable weapons, crafting... The list goes on and on, with mechanics adopted (and adapted) from a wide range of action and adventure games: *Zelda* to *Dark Souls*, *God Of War* to *Respawn's Jedi* games. As proof that VR can do just about everything traditional videogames can, *Asgard's Wrath 2* is remarkable. Whether these ideas belong together, though, is another matter – not least because practically every one of them comes with a caveat. When your focus is on sheer scale, it's easy for the little stuff to get squashed underfoot.

Asgard's Wrath 2 does, however, start small. As initial hero Abraxas, you begin with a basic sword, soon joined by a throwing axe. It's enough to demonstrate the nuances of combat, which outstrips almost any other VR game in ambition if not execution. Fights have a familiar rhythm of parrying attacks and dodging those that flash red, while timely ripostes open up weak points on enemies' bodies. When struck, these not only deal serious damage but refill your HP-insulating Divine Protection meter: essential for surviving longer battles.

There's wisdom to this gradual introduction, for a game that presents itself as a gateway to the medium. And while it takes too long for our more seasoned tastes, Abraxas' arsenal fills out nicely, introducing a throwable shield and additional functions for his existing weapons: a whip mode for the sword that doubles as a grappling hook, and the ability to redirect the axe mid-air, all of which have applications in and out of combat. As the

Developer/publisher Oculus Studios (Sanzaru Games)
Format Quest 2, 3 (tested), Pro
Release Out now

As proof that VR can do just about everything traditional videogames can, it's remarkable



SANDBOX
 One of the ways in which *Asgard's Wrath 2* pushes the boundaries of VR – rather literally, in fact – is its adoption of a semi-open world. Yet, dropped into the featureless expanse of the Egyptian desert, we realise *why* this is such a rarity. Despite arriving in the wake of *Quest 3*'s launch, this game has clearly been built for the previous generation of hardware, which simply cannot handle wide vistas. Its few inhabitants pop into existence just feet away, and there's little to tempt organic exploration – or, indeed, allow for it. Aside from the occasional extra fight or loot chest, substantial diversions are gated off until they're needed for the main quest. See that enormous beast, dragging a tower through the sand? You *can't* go there.

game introduces new characters in later chapters, things are pushed further still. Cyrene wields a harp that can launch weaponised notes, and a hurlable auto-turret in the shape of a jellyfish; necromancer Djehuty is able to pull off and lob his head to possess enemies. Meanwhile, your companion NPC – picked one at a time from a growing roster of humanoid birds and mammals – can be directed with the pointer to attack.

Deemphasising direct hand-to-hand combat is a smart choice, given the inherent problems it faces in VR, such as the lack of feedback when a hit connects, and the artificiality of a stamina system when the game can't stop you swinging your arms. You'll still need to get up close on occasion, though, and here nuance comes apart in the face of multiple combatants, lashings of particle effects and the occasional framerate drop. Wild flailing proves about as effective as a more considered approach anyway, the latter often undone by inaccurate movement tracking. While *Quest 3* is generally reliable on this front, this game has to account for simulated weapons that can catch on one another.

This woolliness carries over to almost every interaction. Grapples frequently miss their intended targets, making traversal challenges infuriating. Jumping to a god's-eye view to solve puzzles, you're able to scoop up pieces of level furniture, but these often contort madly in the hands, complicating even the simplest of solutions. Still, now and then *Asgard's Wrath 2* manages to punch through these shortcomings by application of sheer spectacle and scale. Fleeing a wrathful goddess, we duck beneath exploding scenery and grapple between her limbs like Nathan Drake transplanted into *Shadow Of The Colossus*. There are dragon-slaying bouts that have a touch of the old *God Of War* boss fights to them, and a mountainous turtle that emerges from the Nile like an island forming, its belly big enough to hold a dungeon.

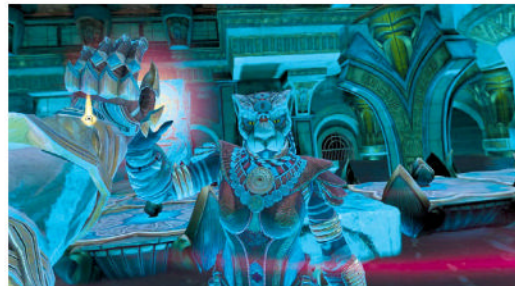
But these moments are punctuation in a saga prone to repeating itself. Every dungeon introduces a puzzle mechanic then stretches it past its limit, while collecting craftable materials feels much more like filler when it must be done manually. Playing a game of this length, it's clear that VR has a time-dilation effect, making every moment of dead air – exposition-dump dialogue, crossing a desert, grinding out resources – more obvious than on a screen from which you can look away.

Scale itself, then, isn't reason enough to recommend *Asgard's Wrath 2* – indeed, we find ourselves questioning the wisdom of such a long game on hardware that must be charged every couple of hours. Its ambitious scope is easier to admire, as Meta's answer to the every-part-of-the-buffalo titles that accompany new Nintendo hardware, but that comparison has us longing for their polish. Too often, what's on offer feels like a succession of incomplete experiments – the shoulders of giants on which other VR games might build.

RIGHT While most dialogue tends towards the bland, the game at least does a good job of involving your hands, whether to deliver a high five or shake on a deal.

BELOW *Asgard's Wrath 2* isn't much of an advert for Quest 3's graphical capabilities: an update shortly after release promises 'enhanced rendering' on the hardware, but the difference isn't an enormous one.

MAIN Each of the game's 'sagas' focuses on a single hero and Big Bad from the pantheon – in this case Sekhmet, the warrior goddess who killed Abraxas' father



ABOVE Your first companion is Subira, who has the energy of Eartha Kitt turned into a literal cat-woman. In battle she stabs enemies in the back with twin blades; out in the world, she can become a rideable panther



Another Code: Recollection

No better subtitle could have been chosen for a duology so sincerely invested in acts of remembrance. Nintendo is well practised in the art of repackaging nostalgia, but there is something especially fitting about this particular *Recollection*. It brings together 2005's *Another Code: Two Memories* and 2009's *Another Code: R – A Journey Into Lost Memories* in more ways than one, with both overhauled and given a consistent visual makeover – such that they now feel less like separate tales that share characters and thematic similarities and more two halves of a cohesive whole. For better and worse, they conjure fond reminiscences of the originals and the developer that made them. And those changes prove fascinating to consider in the context of a narrative about revisiting the past – one that explores the unreliability of human memory and the idea that it might one day be rewritten.

Each game traces a significant day in the life of teenager Ashley Mizuki Robins (we're sure it used to be two 'b's; another false memory, perhaps), whose ice-white hair and large anime eyes speak to her half-Japanese heritage. In *Two Memories*, she's called to the ominously named Blood Edward Island on the cusp of her 14th birthday to meet her scientist father Richard, who she hasn't seen since her mother Sayoko was killed a decade ago. Its successor takes place two years later, as Richard invites Ashley to Lake Juliet, ostensibly to bond during a camping trip but also to tie up the mysteries surrounding the work that led to Sayoko's death.

Both tales are steeped in sadness. At times, *Two Memories* hews close to a ghost story, as Ashley meets wandering spirit D, a boy of similar age whose own past heaps tragedy upon tragedy. A third-act change, meanwhile, provides a moving capstone to *A Journey Into Lost Memories*. Yet while on paper these stories might seem bleak, the tone is closer to that of a genteel Sunday-evening murder mystery: yes, there may have been a death or two, but everyone's largely happy to put their troubles on hold while they tuck into a burger at Bob's Food Hut. It's earnest rather than maudlin, and the brand of trauma it trades in is nothing that can't be resolved by a heart-to-heart. Unlike many of its modern peers, no prior content warning is required.

It's worth remembering that those contemporaries most likely owe something of a debt to Cing's output – particularly *Two Memories*, and the adventure for which the developer is perhaps still best known: *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*. Cing's introspective, narrative-focused approach was in some ways as pioneering as the hardware for which it was designed; the visual novel revival of recent years may have something to do with a generation of game designers having grown up with these games. Whether or not Ashley started a ripple that swelled into a wave of female-fronted games about feelings, it's fair to say that Cing's work – along with

Developer Cing, Arc System Works
Publisher Nintendo
Format Switch
Release Out now

For better and worse, they conjure fond reminiscences of the originals and the developer that made them



AROUND ROBINS

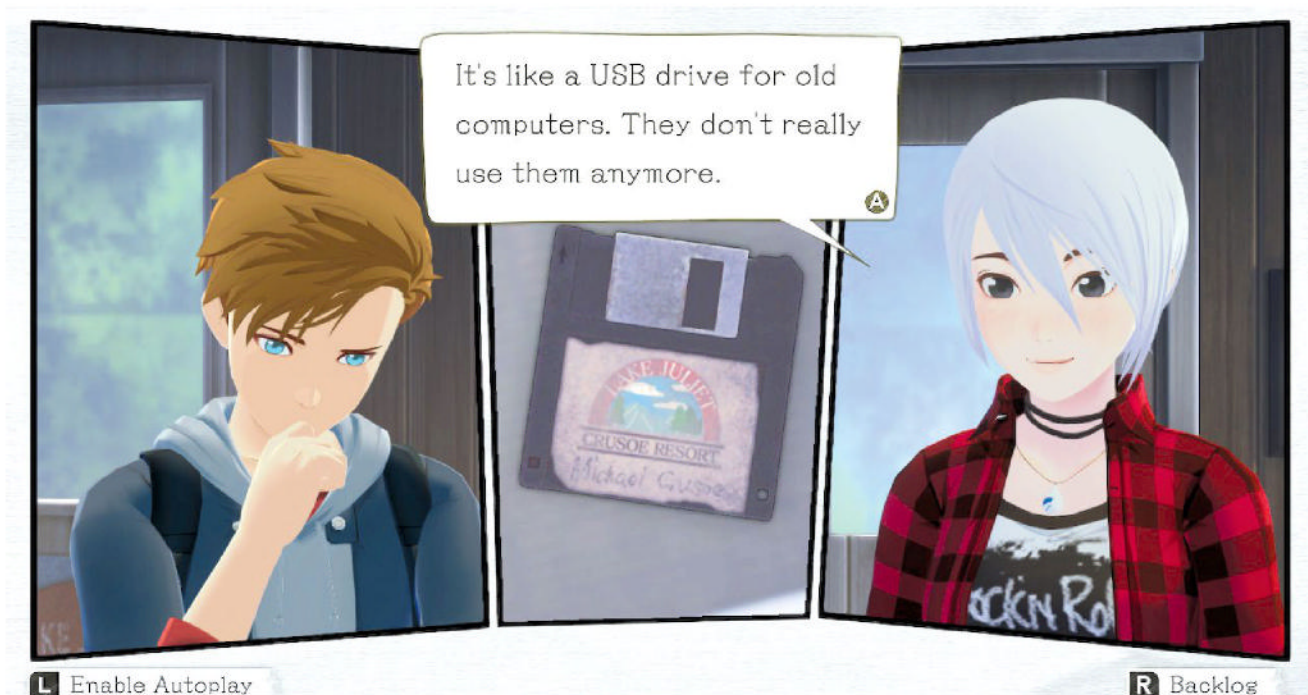
Though the scenery is underwhelming, one advantage of *Recollection's* visual style is that you're unlikely to lose your way: no detective mode is required to negotiate Edward Mansion or Lake Juliet, not least with a map (cutely annotated by Ashley) to hand at all times. But those who need it can toggle a navigational assist that points the way, with key items or environmental features highlighted in yellow. Puzzle hints can also be enabled: tap the minus button and you'll be nudged in the right direction; tap it again and it'll spell out the solution. Outside one or two mild head-scratchers, it's hard to imagine needing it – and in a few cases, even without hints activated, Ashley's voiceover (or that of her companion) will give the game away.

the *Ace Attorney* and *Professor Layton* series – helped revive the narrative adventure. But there's no escaping the fact that, audiovisual adjustments aside, *Recollection* feels like something of a relic.

That's partly a result of what's been lost in the transition to Switch. Though disruptive in its way, Nintendo's current console is more conventional than DS and Wii, and the puzzles that once made the most of those unorthodox control methods have been largely jettisoned. Removing most of the sometimes-arbitrary roadblocks has its benefits, notably in improving the pacing of *A Journey Into Lost Memories*, whose seven-hour runtime is around half that of the 2009 version. But the absence of these puzzles is felt sharply at times, not least since the few that *are* present are notably less inventive (and, in one case, where you're asked to pilot a radio-controlled boat to retrieve a briefcase, actively infuriating). There is certainly nothing that demands the kind of lateral thinking involved in the first game's reflection and stamp conundrums. Nor, for that matter, the security-lock challenges in the second, which have devolved into rudimentary Simon Says exercises.

In striving to bring these games in line with today's visual novels, then, the team behind *Recollection* has only made them seem more old-fashioned, though inviting closer scrutiny of the storytelling also spotlights the qualities that were always present. At a time when games are relying upon increasingly tawdry ways to grab and hold our attention, it's refreshing to sit down with two stories that are content to take their own time to unfold. Eschewing the jolting shocks and sudden twists many games deploy to keep us on the hook, Ashley's coming-of-age journey feels closer to the rhythms of everyday life. Cing's understated approach may not make for white-knuckle storytelling, but its modest milieu serves to ground the fantastical elements and sci-fi flourishes.

That future tech, however, raises awkward questions, particularly when the threat of a character's memories being overwritten looms large. Here, the narrative message is in opposition to its wrapper, since *Recollection's* very existence (not to mention the second game's swingeing cuts) would seem to suggest it's better *not* to remember things as they were. Granted, technology's relentless march complicates matters; *Two Memories*, certainly, would be impossible to replicate precisely on Switch. Though the fact that the original versions of these games are not easily available (thus, in principle, justifying these remakes) speaks to their industry's own strained relationship with its past. It's an inconvenient truth to emerge from what Nintendo was presumably hoping would deliver a dose of the warm and fuzzies. But then as Ashley, recalling a friend's advice, observes, "even though facing the truth can be hard, in the end it's always for the best."



ABOVE A handful of puzzles, such as this tilting maze, use motion controls, but disappointingly – and in stark contrast to the originals – *Recollection* otherwise fails to take advantage of its host hardware's feature set



MAIN Voice acting isn't one of Nintendo's great strengths, but Tsimshian and Japanese-Canadian actor Kaitlyn Yott bucks the trend, delivering a fine turn as Ashley. **ABOVE** Dialogue choices are surprisingly limited; this is one of the rare occasions when you're allowed to pick between responses. **LEFT** Though fairly straightforward to solve, we'd have welcomed a few more tasks like this late-game camera-based conundrum. For the puzzles that do exist, at least they rarely feel incongruous to the plot

Go Mecha Ball

Before setting up Whale Peak Games, Jakob Wahlberg cut his teeth as an artist on the *SteamWorld* games. Yet his studio's debut release, a frenetic arcade-style Roguelike, could hardly be farther from the sedate likes of *SteamWorld Heist* or *Quest*. *Go Mecha Ball* is the twin-stick shooter as fairground ride, by way of the pinball table: your spherical mech is regularly propelled up vertical ramps and through chutes, unfurling its arms and legs to rain down laser destruction on robotic opponents.

Those enemies have emerged from some manner of portal, revealed in simple title cards to have interrupted the blissful existence of protagonist Cat Rascal and her friends — whose response, naturally, is to build a mech suit that folds up into a ball. A little more context for the action that ensues would have been welcome, if hardly essential for a game so focused on arcade thrills. Yet when unfurled, the stomping suit's slow movement doesn't exactly raise the pulse. Per genre tradition, the left stick controls your clomping movement, with the right directing the trajectory of your ordnance with the aid of a generous aim assist. So far, so familiar.

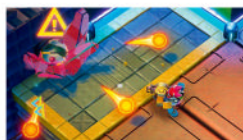
Go Mecha Ball comes to life when you do as the title suggests, squeezing the left trigger to prompt Cat Rascal to curl into a ball, which moves at a much more energetic pace. Though you can't fire in ball form, the right trigger activates a boost, sending Cat Rascal clattering into enemies. Doing so when a hovering exclamation mark indicates an imminent attack will cancel it, allowing you to counter with impunity. Thus you find yourself settling into a rhythm of furling, boosting and unfurling: rolling around to dodge enemy bullets, zipping in for a boost attack and then finishing off a foe with a rattle of machine-gun fire.

It's an approach incentivised by the ammunition system. Since ramming into enemies is the only way to regain rounds, you're forced to engage at close quarters rather than relying on sniping at enemies. There are also combos to consider, with bonus points and occasional health top-ups awarded for seeing off enemies in quick succession. As such, you're encouraged to zip around the arenas with abandon, racing up boost ramps to reach the next set of enemies. The pinball-like features of the arenas change over the game's four worlds: chevroned ramps and curves are soon joined by bumpers, bounce pads, fans and pneumatic tubes, and you find yourself ricocheting around stages like a mechanised Sonic.

Though you begin each run with the same basic machine gun, enemies occasionally drop new weapons. They may also leave behind blue and gold coins: the latter can be spent in a shop every few levels (or saved up to purchase suits with different stats), while the former can be pumped into gacha machines at the start of the game, unlocking more weapons, abilities and upgrades. These weapons will subsequently appear in

Developer Whale Peak Games
Publisher Super Rare Originals
Format PC (tested), Xbox One, Xbox Series
Release Out now

Go Mecha Ball is the twin-stick shooter as fairground ride, by way of the pinball table



WRECKING CREW

There's a pleasing variety to the enemies in *Go Mecha Ball*, which means you'll regularly have to adapt your strategy. Some will simply try to ram you, some will leap up and try to squash you, and others will fire torrents of bullets or a huge mortar shell. One variant fires a devastating laser beam, and blocks frontal assaults. Another can only be shot in its rotating eye. One particularly tiny and nippy fellow will zoom around topping up the health of other enemies, meaning it needs to be prioritised for dispatch. Quickly ascertaining how best to attack each foe is key, but it's another reason why heedlessly barrelling around the levels at great speed is rarely advised.

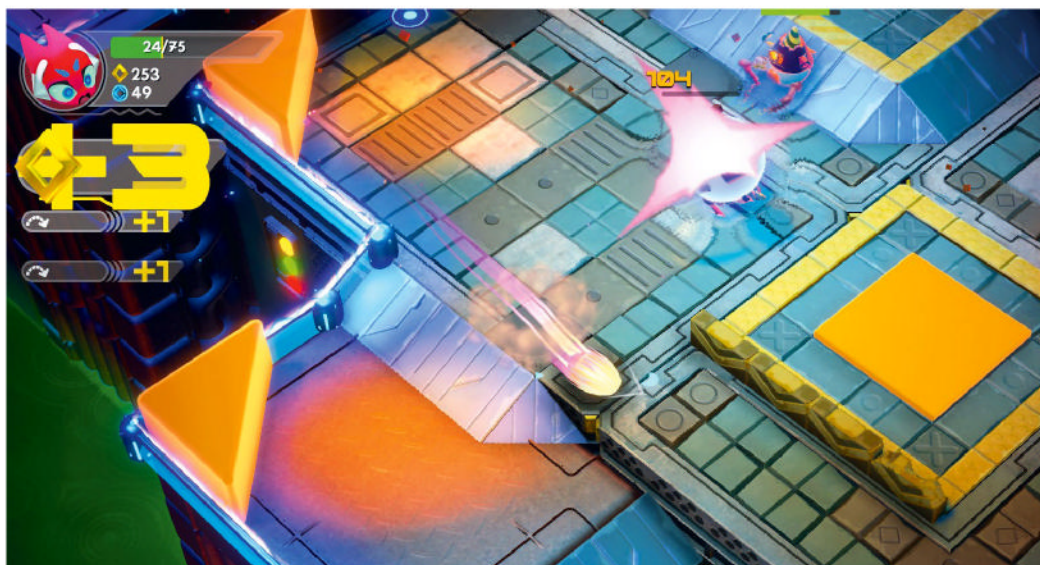
levels, while a choice between three abilities and upgrades (such as increased gun damage, grenades or greater boost power) is offered at the end of each stage. These can also be bought in the shop, although again you're limited to a selection of three.

Whether by luck or judgement, your growing loadout has a marked effect on your chances of success. Some abilities are surprisingly feeble: chain lightning does so little damage that it's not worth bothering with. Yet others can be devastating, such as a spin attack that can tear through even the toughest foes. And since abilities are limited by a cooldown timer rather than reliant on ammo, they quickly become a reliable fallback.

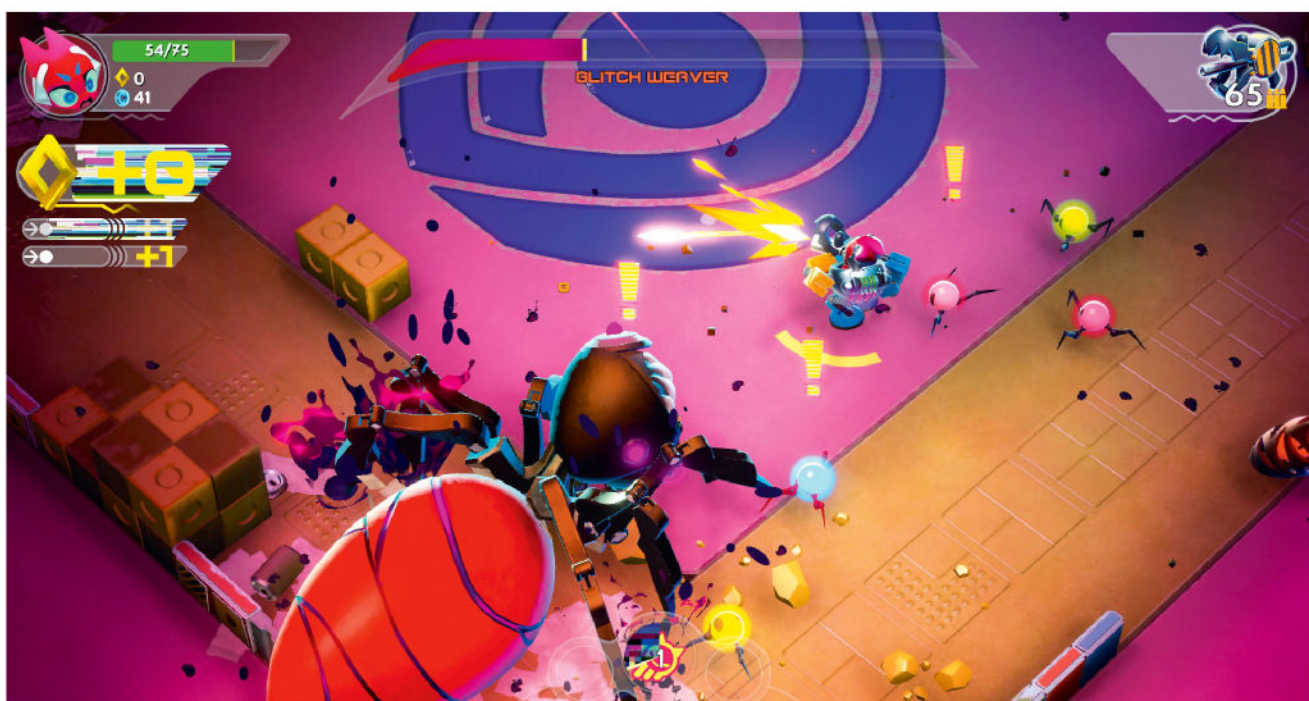
It wouldn't be a Roguelike without the opportunity to become overpowered, of course, but some combinations can turn otherwise tough boss fights into cakewalks. Popping up every three levels, these giant beasts provide a much needed health top-up if you can defeat them. Ordinarily, that's no easy feat, but equipped with an EMP and spin attack, you can immobilise and pound them with constant attacks. Individual weapons, too, can mean the difference between success and failure: finding what amounts to a machine gun that fires rockets will make your life considerably simpler. Naturally, that works both ways, meaning that each run is something of a lottery. In particular, the appearance — or non-appearance — of health packs at the shop can make or break a run. The store pops up immediately before each boss, and if you arrive with just a sliver of health only to find the shopkeeper neglected to stock up on restoratives that day, you may as well abandon hope of progressing any further.

As a result, *Go Mecha Ball* can be as frustrating as it is exhilarating. Firing Cat Rascal up ramps and off bumpers might be thrilling, yet it's also a good way to get killed, as you ricochet into bullets or groups of enemies and quickly become overwhelmed. It's the classic *Sonic* problem: you're encouraged to go fast, and then punished for doing exactly that. The Roguelike structure means that health is precious, befitting a more conservative play style in which you approach enemies cautiously and dispatch them before moving on to the next group. The health boosts gained from combos are so meagre and infrequent that dashing around to keep your tally high is seldom worth the risk.

That fairground rush, then, wears off over umpteen playthroughs, many curtailed more by misfortune than mistake. With more generous health pickups, and without such stark discrepancies between abilities and weapons, *Go Mecha Ball's* biggest frustrations could be eased. As it stands — or rolls — the combination of luck and skill required for success recaptures the era of Gottlieb and Bally. In more ways than one, Whale Peak's debut sure plays a mean pinball.



LEFT Orange bumpers and jump pads send your ball mech flying.
MAIN The first boss is Glitch Weaver, a giant insect robot that spawns insectoid companions.
BOTTOM The second boss appears in an arena with four fans, which you can use to fire your mech into the air to avoid enemy attacks



ABOVE These leaping foes begin appearing in the second world, and the orange circle indicates the area of damage when they land. Cat Rascal has just picked up some ammo, which enemies drop after you boost into them



Home Safety Hotline

Maybe it's the shortcomings of older hardware that makes it such a potent setting for horror. Certainly, the noisy whirr of a '90s PC on startup and the soft clicks and clunks as data slowly loads suggest some manner of ghost in this machine. The indistinct quality of the green-tinged images from our CRT monitor and the crackly sounds from its internal speakers have a similarly haunted quality. Meanwhile, the grainy sub-VHS-standard videos that mysteriously pop up on the desktop make a virtue of what our ears and eyes can't quite make out.

This absorbing entry into the burgeoning analogue-horror subgenre is likewise defined by its limitations. Your job is straightforward. At the beginning of each workday you double-click to clock in for a shift at the eponymous call centre. Customers call in outlining issues around their home – scratching sounds in the walls, droppings in the kitchen, holes in the garden – and you must refer to your database to diagnose the cause. At which point your employer will automatically forward them instructions on how to deal with said hazard.

At first, our natural inclination is to hurry, so as not to keep customers waiting (and forcing them to listen to the bossa nova hold music). But they're a patient bunch

You will get fired if you repeatedly give out bad advice, though there's another incentive to play well: there's a reward (of sorts) for achieving over 90 per cent on a given shift. A bit of study time certainly pays off at the end

Developer/publisher
Night Signal Entertainment
Format PC
Release Out now



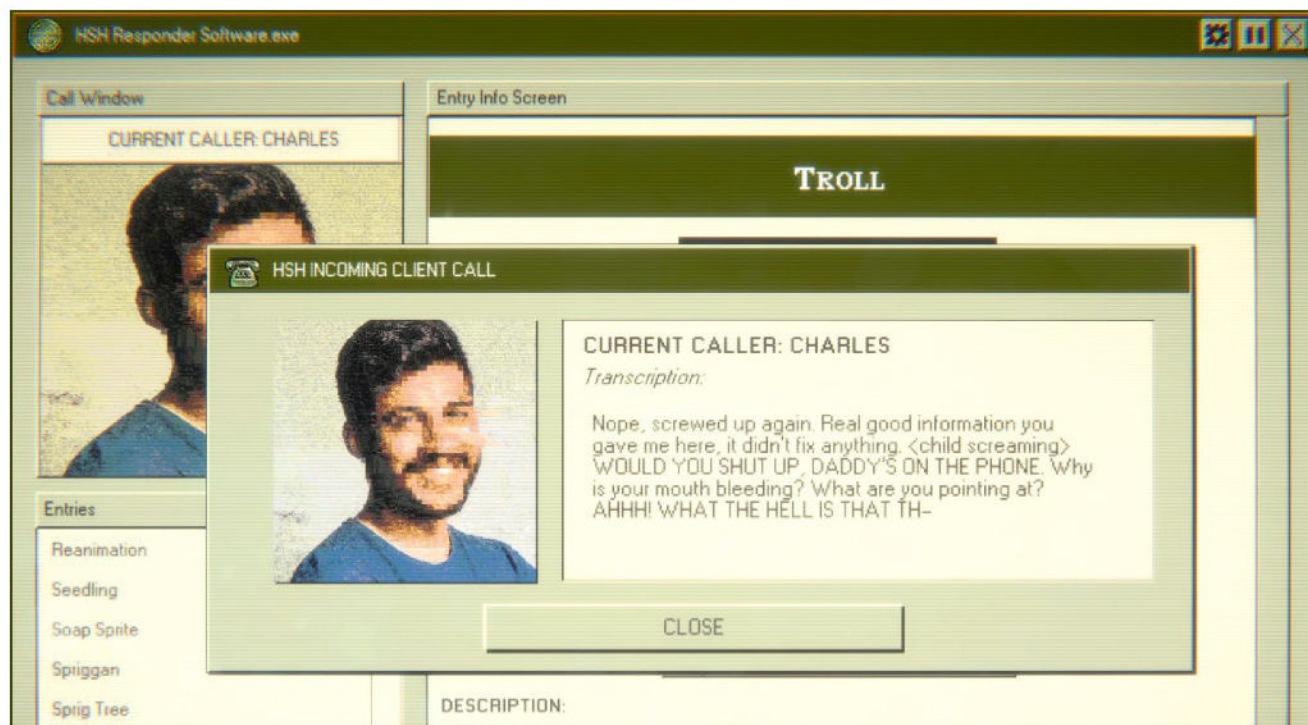
CRITTERS CRUNCHED

Finish the game and on your in-game desktop you'll see a new addition: a digital art book that also goes into some detail on the making of *Home Safety Hotline*. Creator Nick Lives runs through his various influences – Dungeons & Dragons' Monster Manual first inspired the idea – while spotlighting his original art (painted creatures superimposed onto photographs) before it was reduced to pixelated form. Tellingly, the game's menagerie seems a good deal less frightening here.

and you can take time to browse through the steadily growing list of entries until you're confident of your answer. You can't always be certain – some descriptions are vague enough to apply to two or three possible pests, though listening out for sounds during the call and studying the transcription in detail usually narrows it down to one. Yet if it's satisfying to achieve 100 per cent accuracy, you're sparing yourself some of the horror: little here freezes the blood like a stern admonishment from your superiors. An irate call from a dissatisfied customer, meanwhile, is a chastening experience indeed.

As the days go by, things grow more unsettling still. Anonymous emails from a disgruntled employee warn that you're in danger. Distorted voices and glitchy dial tones unnerve. And sporadic network outages force you to internalise as much of the bestiary as you can between calls (the hotline has a nasty habit of ringing just as you're reading through a particularly disturbing detail, or listening to a cryptid's cry). Fine voice performances mean the calls themselves often unsettle, though sometimes it's not until you realise the implications of your diagnosis that the chill reaches your spine. With a little more mechanical variety, this might've been a minor classic. Even within its modest parameters, though, it is a terrific piece of worldbuilding – one that leaves us anxiously looking around our own home after we clock out for the final time.

7



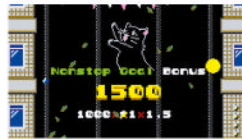
Raindrop Sprinters

At the front end of this review section is a game that could only realistically have been made today. By contrast, here's one that could potentially have existed 40 years ago. *Raindrop Sprinters* even has the livery of a vintage arcade game around its playspace: no need for a tutorial when you can have your instructions in their entirety on permanent display. The distinctions between the four game modes are detailed on the right, but until the remaining three are unlocked, all you need to know is contained on the left of the screen. Your goal, indeed, can be reduced to just ten words, displayed beneath the game's logo: 'Pouring raindrops... run through the passage and don't get wet!'

It's the kind of idea you convince yourself must surely have been done before, in some unremembered form. You play as a tabby – represented by a single, bouncing paw – which must run between two buildings, dodging blue raindrops as they fall from a corrugated covering that spans the gap. A single hit (in three of the game types, at least) means game over, which means you must time your advances carefully, though to maximise your score for each trip from left to right – upon reaching the second building you're transported back to the first – you'll need to run without stopping.

Small, delightful touches abound: top the leaderboard and you'll get a different celebratory tune than if you merely breach the top five, while you can hold the Start button to return to the menu and again to quit to desktop

Developer Room 909
Publisher Mediascape Co
Format PC (tested), Switch
Release Out now



INCLEMENT INCREMENTS

The last of the unlockable modes, Maverick, gives you just 30 seconds per run, encouraging you to get wet to boost your score, though you'll need to seek shelter if your body temperature drops too much. Onrush extends your slow-motion gauge as stars also top it up, your bonus increasing the more you use it. Customize lets you adjust the challenge, with a variety of items (an umbrella, a mid-stage gazebo) and obstacles (high winds, lightning bolts) affecting your score.

That needn't always mean delaying your sprint, however. Instead, you can hold a face button to slow the rain if a droplet's descent looks set to coincide with your sortie – depleting a gauge that refills a little when you make it to the other side. Or you can stay out in the shower, risking a soaking to collect falling, bouncing stars. The more of *these* you gather – the maximum per run increasing as you level up – the higher the bonus.

It could not be more straightforward; at times you wonder if there's almost too little to it. But the knowledge that each playthrough contributes to unlocking the other modes (see 'Inclement increments') will keep you playing for a good couple of hours at least, by which time you will most likely have grasped the conditions for unlocking seven skill-boosting 'badges' (finishing without them is a stern challenge in itself, requiring five successful runs through what eventually becomes a torrential downpour). There is genuine character in its presentation, too, from the four distinct jingles that follow successful sprints to the anticipation-heightening Cambridge chimes that precede a new run, the leaderboards celebrating the 'top five brave cats' and the game-over text – 'It's cooooooooooold!' – that somehow mollifies the frustration of a run prematurely ended. It's a reminder that good ideas are timeless. Another 40 years from now, we suspect it won't have aged a day.

8





TIME **EXTEND**

Rock Band 4

Harmonix's swan song for the
plastic-instrument era lives on

BY DIEGO NICOLÁS ARGÜELLO

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Developer/publisher Harmonix **Format** PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2015

Seeing a *Mass Effect: Andromeda* recruit jamming on a bass guitar shaped like the Normandy, with a gasmasked *Fallout 4* vault dweller on drums, is a time capsule from a very specific moment in videogame history. As, indeed, is their stage of choice. *Rock Band 4* is the last survivor from a bygone era of plastic-instrument games, their peripherals now mostly consigned to landfills and charity shops, and a gentle introduction to what would become standard live-service practices across the rest of the industry. But it's a time capsule you can still dig up and experience firsthand, Harmonix's coup de grâce still active and receiving support as it approaches the end of its first decade. Given how quickly the genre had moved – and moved on – in the years prior, that's nothing short of a miracle.

By now, it's surely safe to assume you know the drill, if not of this particular game then certainly one of its many predecessors. You pick an instrument, choose a song (one that, in the latter titles, you most likely bought as an addon), and start playing along by hitting the plastic buttons in time with the onscreen prompt. It's a simple but marvellous concept that was expanded on enormously over a relatively short span. In the *Guitar Hero* series, the range of instruments quickly grew from just lead guitar to include bass and rhythm. *Rock Band* added drums and vocals when it launched in 2007, and then keyboard for its third iteration. Both series also spawned spinoffs, with *Rock Band* famously tying into The Beatles and even Lego, allowing for reinventions of its visual style along the way.

To fully understand how we got here, though, we must rewind further still, to the end of the 20th century. In 1999, Konami's *GuitarFreaks* and *DrumMania* went beyond 1997's *Beatmania* by asking players to perform songs on controllers shaped like musical instruments, tapping their buttons to match onscreen patterns. The games failed to earn mainstream notice outside of Japanese arcades, but it was in these places that Harmonix's founders first encountered the concept that would make their name.

Formed in Boston in 1995, the studio made its debut that same year with *The Axe*,

a piece of software in which music could be played with a PC joystick. According to co-founder Alex Rigopulos, it sold all of 300 copies. After a few more lean years, the company's founders decided to try to break into the Japanese karaoke market. While that effort was a failure, visiting Japan introduced them to the local enthusiasm for rhythm games, yet to make a big dent in the US market. The discovery was funnelled into 2001's *Frequency* and its successor *Amplitude*, the studio's first actual games, which also established its licensed-music credentials, incorporating tracks by the likes of No Doubt, Orbital and Run-DMC. Neither game was a commercial hit, but – along with a deal with Konami to develop *Karaoke Revolution* – they were enough to catch the eye of RedOctane, a peripheral manufacturer that had recently decided it would make sense to make music games as well as the accessories for playing them.

From there, everything took off. Just ten years separate the release of the first *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band 4* – time enough for a dozen instalments of the former series and nine of the latter (not including portable and mobile spinoffs). At the same time, Harmonix and RedOctane went from collaborators to competitors, after buyouts from MTV and Activision respectively split up the partnership. (Given that, at their peak, individual titles in this lineage broke \$1bn in sales, it's not difficult to see why they would have been acquisition targets.)

By 2015, though, the spark was dwindling. RedOctane had released its final game, *Guitar Hero World Tour*, in 2008, with development duties passing to internal Activision studios; two years later, the company was closed. Fellow series stewards Neversoft and FreeStyle Games were folded into the *Call Of Duty* machine, the former shutting down in 2014, the latter sold to Ubisoft to become one of its many support studios. Yet, as the 2010s welcomed a new console generation, there was one final attempt at continuing each series' legacy. *Rock Band 4* hit the shelves in October 2015, and a few weeks later Activision followed suit with *Guitar Hero Live*.

While *Live* bet on an FMV-driven experience that would change depending on your performance, played via a new, more ▶





complex guitar peripheral, *Rock Band 4* was firmly focused on fine-tuning and unifying what already existed. Even within the context of its own family tree, *Rock Band 4*'s role might be that of the sensible older sibling. Its direct predecessor – the apex of the entire genre – was unafraid to reinvent without compromising its roots, adding to the selection of instruments a keyboard and Pro guitar controller that essentially mimicked its real-life counterpart. Neither is supported in the follow-up.

As a successor, then, *Rock Band 4* might initially seem like a step back, with a more standardised visual presentation offering fewer options for character customisation, and a far more rigid career mode. But in 2015 it rekindled a flame that could easily have died out. And there proved to be great value in that sensibility, as the game allowed



2018, for instance, 92 per cent of the track catalogue vanished alongside them. In December 2022, a year after Harmonix was acquired by Epic, it delisted the app for tabletop-digital hybrid *DropMix* and shut down its PC and console successor, *Fuser*. A year later, Harmonix launched *Fortnite Festival*, finally making sense of Epic's buyout, but leaving the long-term prospects of *Rock Band* itself in question.

Epic deactivated the servers and online features of the first three *Rock Bands* in January 2023, but skills picked up in those games can be immediately put to work in the 2015 game

SOMETIMES A DRUMMER WILL SHOW UP MID-SESSION THEN LEAVE AFTER ONE SONG, WITHOUT MISSING A SINGLE BEAT

players to migrate all their previously purchased DLC tracks, and introduced compatibility for other peripherals, including E-Drum kits. It laid a solid foundation that could last the test of time, and one on which Harmonix has continued to build.

Not that it's especially easy to get into nowadays. Mad Catz, which manufactured official guitar and drum controllers for *Rock Band 3* and *4*, closed in 2017. PDP, which worked with Harmonix for *Rock Band Rivals*' instruments, ceased production years ago. Second-hand instruments often cost way more than their long-forgotten retail prices. And that's before taking into account how much you're likely to spend on songs.

There's also the always-tricky matter of music licensing to consider, with plenty of examples illustrating what can go wrong. When *Guitar Hero Live*'s servers shut in

Today, though, *Rock Band 4* stands firm. Since its release it has added support for asynchronous online multiplayer and competitive band clans, and received over 30 seasons of challenges and cosmetic rewards, not to mention new tracks that continue to roll out on a weekly basis. You can play *Rock Band 4* on modern consoles – and, for all the barriers to entry it puts up, people *do*. Take a glance at the game's subreddit or the official Discord server and you'll still find hundreds of music enthusiasts sharing tips, high scores and celebrating photos from jam sessions with friends in local bars and living rooms. Fire up multiplayer, meanwhile, and you're guaranteed to find somebody failing to get a full combo in *Free Bird* or singing *Mr Brightside* at odd times of a weeknight.

Despite its minimal conversational cues – “Let's rock!” or “Sorry, I choked” – playing



Second-hand kits are still available on reseller sites, albeit at significantly more than the original RRP



ON A SIMILAR NOTE

If the watered-down action of *Fortnite* Festival doesn't scratch the *Rock Band* itch, where else can you look? *Frets On Fire* and *Clone Hero* are freeware alternatives offering support for community-made songs, while the visual flair and licensed tracks of Harmonix's games have been picked up in genre hybrids *Hi-Fi Rush* and *Metal: Hellsinger*. In the VR world, *Rock Band* came to *Oculus Rift* in 2017, but it was the arrival of *Beat Saber* that truly pointed the way for this evolving genre, transforming the familiar beat highways into a sort of abstracted combat arena. It's a formula that has been picked up by *Pistol Whip*, *Synth Riders* and by Harmonix itself with 2019's VR rhythm shooter *Audica*.

While *Guitar Hero Live* features live-action actors, *Rock Band 4* holds fast to the series' cartoonish visual roots



Rock Band 4 players are active online every day. Alas, four out of five tend to immediately pick guitar over bass

online feels like a true shared experience, and one that is often enchanting. Sometimes a drummer will show up mid-session then leave after one song, without missing a single beat; at others, you and a stranger might tear through an entire playlist of old standards together before parting ways. Whoever you're playing alongside, it's still impossible to suppress a smile when the band simultaneously activates *Overdrive*, playing louder and more confidently as a unit. Inter-band banter might be a rock-show standard but these moments are more like those over-the-shoulder smiles you occasionally catch performers sharing, as the crowd picks up their beat. Who needs words when you have music?

No wonder Epic chose to incorporate Harmonix's work into *Fortnite*, where dance moves have long rivalled voice comms as the primary mode of communication. Or, viewed

more cynically, perhaps it simply saw in *Rock Band*'s spin on the live-service model a way of turning over yet more stacks of V-Bucks. (Here, Festival's shuffling selection of free songs actually borrows a little from *Guitar Hero Live*, which similarly offered an MTV-style channel schedule for players not willing to splash out with cash.)

Yet *Fortnite* Festival isn't a true continuation of this legacy. *Rock Band* players can't import their library of songs, and while Epic is promising instrument support (and PDP teasing a new guitar controller), it's unclear whether this will be compatible with existing peripherals. And those concerns about long-term preservation are only exacerbated by a digital-only game that rarely stays static for long.

In the meantime, *Rock Band 4* players continue to strap on their space helmets and tighten their jumpsuits, paying tribute with callused thumbs and broken nails. And at least a small remnant of Harmonix is willing to answer their calls for an encore. Both sides know they're on borrowed time. There'll come a day — possibly hastened by Epic's recent moves — when developer support finally halts altogether, when older instruments cease to work and the online component becomes inaccessible. But maybe that's appropriate for the artform to which these games were a love letter. Every song is a time capsule, ultimately, as the selective libraries of music-streaming services increasingly decide what is available for listening. Nevertheless, the beat goes on. ■





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T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Resident Evil 4

Developer/publisher Capcom Format PSVR2 Release 2023

For a series originally defined by its fixed camera angles, *Resident Evil* has gone through a lot of perspective shifts over the years. *Resi 4*'s was the first, switching to an over-the-shoulder tracking shot that reinvented an entire genre — including its own predecessors, becoming the house style of Capcom's recent remakes. Yet for this VR update, the game takes its lead from the series' *other* branch, adopting (with occasional exceptions) a firstperson perspective. This isn't the first time *Resi 4* has been playable this way; a Quest 2 version was released in 2021. But that felt like a pleasant curio, continuing the game's long tradition of being ported onto every possible format; PSVR2 may well be the definitive way to play this remake.

This might, indeed, be the most visually sumptuous game VR has to offer — provided you don't mind being wrapped in rain-slick greys rather than *Call Of The Mountain*'s airy light. But there's no debate about its action. As in *Village*'s VR mode, the weapons are put directly into your hands. The SR-09 R can be steadied with a second hand; the Stingray's scope must be brought up to your eye to snipe; when ammo runs out, magazines must be manually ejected and new ones loaded in, the process differing just enough from weapon to weapon to confound muscle memory when

you're in a tight spot. Of which, thanks to the perfect pacing of *Resi 4*'s combat encounters, there are plenty.

Even a trio of approaching Ganados is enough to make us sweat, especially when the limited perspective means we miss the fourth sneaking up from behind. And that's just the rank and file. The first time a Plaga bursts from a neck stem, right up in our face, we involuntarily make a noise of which we'd never have imagined ourselves capable. The whirr of Dr Salvador's chainsaw has never felt so dangerous; nor El Gigante so, well, gigantic. The only major set-piece that fares less well is Del Lago. Throwing harpoons is reduced to a point-and-click interaction, while the thrashing boat tests our VR sea legs. (Since the mode is treated as a separate game, there's no opportunity to switch to the 'flat' version and complete this section that way.)

It's a rare example of compromise, though, amid a wealth of sharp design choices. Take Leon's roundhouse kick, where the camera reverts to thirdperson tradition — a matter of necessity, perhaps, but also a smart adjustment of the combat's rhythms, providing a rare breather and an opportunity to take stock of the situation. While the remake was a pleasant enough way to revisit an all-time classic, this VR mode lets us see things from a whole new perspective. ■

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